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## Purpose as a Powerful Resource in the Time of COVID-19

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### Abstract

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a novel disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2), has claimed thousands of lives within the past few months; disrupted people's participation in work, family, and school settings; and challenged economic and health care systems across the globe. In light of the countless challenges posed by COVID-19, a sense of purpose (i.e., a long-term life aim that guides behavior and contributes to the world beyond oneself) may be one important psychological resource for people of all ages to develop and/or recruit during this crisis. This article provides a brief overview of the purpose development literature, the argument that a growing or solidified sense of purpose can serve as an important internal resource during periods of adversity, and recommendations for practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Keywords

[purpose](#), [COVID-19](#), [adversity](#)

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Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a novel disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2), has transformed the world in a matter

of months ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \[CDC\], 2020](#)). As of May 28, 2020, there have been 5,704,736 confirmed cases of COVID-19, which have resulted in 357,736 deaths across the globe ([World Health Organization, 2020](#)). With rapidly rising rates of infection; the temporary closing of schools, businesses, cultural centers, and places of worship; and palpable anxiety felt among people around the world, psychologists are faced with a responsibility to offer their expertise during this unprecedented crisis. As a researcher and clinician, my growing expertise is in the field of purpose development, particularly purpose that develops in the face of adversity. Thus, this article explores how a growing or solidified sense of purpose can serve as an important psychological resource for people during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as provides suggestions for psychologists and other mental health professionals about incorporating purpose interventions into their work.

## Sense of Purpose

Purpose is defined as a personally meaningful, relatively stable intention that guides behavior, is characterized by active engagement, and contributes to the world beyond oneself ([Damon et al., 2003](#)). The discussion of purpose has a decades-long history in existential and humanistic psychology. Psychiatrist Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, and the father of purpose as a field of study, wrote about harrowing experiences of suffering and injustice and the role of purpose in sustaining his life ([Frankl, 1959/1985](#)). Frankl's observations resulted in the development of logotherapy, an orientation within existential psychology that assumes that meaning making is a basic human motivation and that meaning and purpose are relevant constructs across all phases of life, especially circumstances characterized by immeasurable stress and suffering ([Frankl, 1990](#)). Other early existential and humanistic theorists offered similar ideas; for instance, Abraham Maslow suggested that "commitment to an important job" leads to self-actualization and, ultimately, happiness ([Maslow, 2000](#), p. 12).

Indeed, having a sense of purpose is beneficial for people across the life span and is associated with hope ([Burrow et al., 2010](#)) and resilience ([Benard, 1991](#)), as well as improved academic (e.g., [Damon et al., 2003](#)) and physical health outcomes (e.g., [Hill & Turiano, 2014](#); [Ryff, 1989](#)). While people can have self-oriented aims for their future, an other-oriented sense of purpose (i.e., a purpose that contributes to others) is associated with greater psychological health, openness, and contentment ([Bronk & Finch, 2010](#); [Mariano & Vaillant, 2012](#)). Purpose can make the mundane tasks of life matter by helping people connect them to a larger contributory life aim ([Liang, Lund, et al., 2017](#)). Recent

research has also shown that a preexisting purpose can help buffer the effects of stress and facilitate emotional recovery in the face of adversity (Burrow & Hill, 2013; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). In short, people are generally psychologically and physically healthier when they have a meaningful reason to live and ways to contribute to the world beyond themselves.

Given the benefits of having a sense of purpose, there has been an increasing interest in understanding the development of purpose (Damon et al., 2003). Purpose development often occurs alongside identity development during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Throughout adolescence, people develop improved cognitive capacities and become more capable of considering abstract, identity, and existential questions (e.g., *Who am I? What do I value? What is my purpose?* Damon et al., 2003; Erikson, 1968; Fitzgerald, 2005). Because wrestling with existential questions about identity and purpose can be anxiety provoking, fostering purpose often involves scaffolding and support from others (Berman et al., 2006; Blattner et al., 2013; Liang, White, Mousseau, et al., 2017). Recent qualitative studies of youth have shown that forming supportive relationships with people who can offer guidance, as well as possessing a specific passion, relevant character strengths and skills, and a desire to contribute to others, can help facilitate the development of purpose (e.g., Liang, White, Mousseau, et al., 2017). Kashdan and McKnight (2009) offered a pathway model of purpose development, including three pathways that are not mutually exclusive: observing others engage in purposeful action (i.e., the social learning pathway), partaking in one's own exploration of purposeful activities (i.e., the proactive pathway), and responding to a significant or transformative life event (i.e., the reactive pathway). Indeed, we know from history that transformative life events (e.g., adversity) can inspire purpose development via the reactive pathway (Frankl, 1959/1985; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). In sum, purpose is understood not only as a powerful internal psychological resource to draw on during times of stress, as in the case of Victor Frankl, but also as a positive, life-giving construct that can be cultivated among people through a variety of pathways (Damon et al., 2003; Frankl, 1959/1985; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009).

## Implications for Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis that is creating extraordinary challenges for our health care system, the economy, and our lives (CDC, 2020). To be sure, psychologists and other mental health professionals have much to do in the here-and-now to support people's well-being in the midst of this crisis (American Psychological Association, 2020). However, the purpose literature can offer wisdom about how to

understand the opportunities and growth that are present and may emerge from this global adversity. We know that people often can transform challenging experiences into great opportunities—adversity into purpose—and that a committed sense of purpose can fuel people to persevere when faced with hardship (Frankl, 1959/1985; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). COVID-19 may represent a profound initiator of the reactive pathway for many people who have felt significantly affected by this pandemic (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Informed by my applied research and intervention work (e.g., Klein et al., 2019), as well as my clinical experience, I offer the following recommendations for practice.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly brought a disruption in routine and feelings of fear and uncertainty to many people's lives (American Psychological Association, 2020). For youth—and adults—who are still developing a sense of purpose, engaging in goal-directed action may be one way to manage these challenging feelings and actively cope with stress (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Smith & Zautra, 2000). Yalom (1980) argued that wholehearted engagement in meaningful activities was critical for fostering meaning and purpose. In our intervention work, my colleagues and I say that one's purpose lies at the intersection of one's unique values, character strengths, skills, passions, and desired impact (Klein et al., 2019). People can discuss, build, and/or teach some of the skills, strengths, and values that we know are precursors to purpose. Engaging in fulfilling and purposeful activities, such as writing, drawing, reading, learning, and building, represent the proactive pathway to purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Ideally, purposeful activities reflect people's character strengths and positive traits (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Increased time at home may present people with newfound opportunities to explore passions or budding interests, and a growing sense of purpose may help make the possible boredom of being at home feel more tolerable and meaningful (Liang, Lund, et al., 2017).

Moreover, I encourage people to consider the following questions: What needs do I see in the world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? What are my values, and how are they related to my experience of COVID-19? What strengths and skills do I have or want to develop to help address the needs I have observed? Given what we know about purpose development pathways (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009), I have already begun to wonder what purposes in life may emerge from this pandemic, especially in light of the vulnerabilities that have been illuminated in our systems. For example, we may see a rise in people hoping to enter the health care profession, study infectious diseases, advance technology to increase remote work and school options, and fight for justice in our social services systems. We may also see people approaching family life and leisure in new ways, with greater appreciation of quality time and care for the elderly. Indeed, adversity

can inspire a deeper reflection on one's values and priorities, a psychological need to make meaning out of and grow from that adversity, and, ultimately, a sense of purpose (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; White, 2020).

We also know that prosocial intentions and engagement are precursors to purpose (Liang, Lund, et al., 2017). Therefore, I recommend that people brainstorm the ways they can make a difference to someone beyond themselves in the wake of COVID-19, while still respecting the current public health recommendations for social distancing (CDC, 2020). For example, people can send messages of gratitude to health care workers, make efforts to stay virtually connected to vulnerable loved ones, sew masks for hospitals that are requesting them, and find virtual platforms for volunteering. In sum, I encourage people to try to gain a sense of control and contribution during this pandemic, as people often make meaning out of their difficult experiences by finding ways to contribute to others (Liang, White, Rhodes, et al., 2017; White, 2020).

For people who are purposeful (i.e., those with a long-term life aim that directs their behavior and contributes to the world beyond themselves) and may be grappling with the numerous challenges associated with COVID-19, I believe that now is a good time to continue engaging in purposeful action, as well as reflect on one's purpose. Indeed, reflection is one avenue toward improved mental health across the life span (Noam & Triggs, 2018). For example, health care providers working directly with sick patients can reflect on the reasons they entered their chosen profession and rely on their sense of purpose as a psychological resource to foster resilience as they bravely put their health at risk (Burrow & Hill, 2013; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). They can notice the ways in which a sense of purpose can help make the mundane, challenging, and exhausting tasks of work and life matter (Liang, Lund, et al., 2017). I recommend reflecting on the following questions: What values are reflected in my purpose, and how can I work and live according to those values in the midst of this pandemic? What unique strengths and skills do I have to offer to my family, my friends, my colleagues, and the people I help through my work? What is my intended contribution in my work and family life, and how do my contributions matter now?

I also suggest that people—both clients and mental health professionals—recognize the opportunities for inspiring others to become more purposeful in the midst of this pandemic. As a psychology intern at a major hospital, I have observed my colleagues quickly adapt to the restrictions placed on psychotherapy by COVID-19, develop innovative interventions, and offer an extraordinary amount of support to their colleagues and people in training. These coworkers provide models for the type of professional I aim to be. I am

inspired to reflect on the values that I want to bring to my work (e.g., adaptability and creativity), even during times of rapid change and upheaval. As a budding psychologist and as someone who is continuously reflecting on my own purpose in life, I am grateful for the growth my peers and I are able to experience via the social learning pathway (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009) during this unprecedented time for psychology training and practice.

Finally, it is important to note that while stressful and transformative experiences can inspire the development of purpose, people can be thwarted on their purpose trajectories if they lack sufficient social support in the face of stress (Gutowski et al., 2017). When circumstances seem too overwhelming and unconquerable, people are at risk for feeling unable to pursue their goals or contribute to others, especially if they lack emotional and informational support from others (Gutowski et al., 2017). Thus, it is imperative to be mindful of the ways in which sustaining and/or cultivating meaningful relationships, especially as people face an elevated level of stress, worry, and/or exhaustion, are an integral part of fostering purpose (Liang, White, Mousseau, et al., 2017) and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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