

Making Meaning during Coronavirus

Mary Kate Lee

We've been in quarantine for about seven weeks now. During this short time, our lives have been flipped upside down and turned inside out in many different capacities. The sandwich generation may be simultaneously caring for their children and parents while working from home. High school and college graduates are unable to celebrate their milestones in traditional ways. Many are out of a paycheck and without health insurance. Some are struggling with the insufferable pain of loneliness. Some have lost loved ones to the coronavirus.

If you've asked yourself, "*Why is this happening? What's the meaning of this?*" you're not alone. Human beings are meaning-making creatures. We instinctively need to give ourselves a reasonable explanation for the triumphs and trauma in our lives. Does the phrase 'everything happens for a reason' come to mind? That phrase serves as a mental respite to cope with hardship. In order to adaptively cope with adversity (in this case, coronavirus) we must be able to make meaning out of our individual situations.

Here, an important distinction must be made between the meaning of life and meaning in life.^{1,2} Pondering the meaning of life is about posing those big, philosophical questions: "*Why are we here? How did humans come to exist? What's our reason for being as a human race?*" However, meaning in our lives stems from how we construct our individual and personal meaning. In this sense, meaning is something each of us develops, decides on, and/or chooses within our limited power and circumstances.²

Why Meaning Matters

Making meaning in our individual lives during coronavirus will help us adapt to our current realities and the side effects of the pandemic. The ability to evoke meaning from negative events is associated with positive adjustment and less distress, which results in increased resiliency.³ In terms of our current situation and dealing with coronavirus, an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, lack of control, and helplessness (which are normal and common feelings to experience during this time) can easily lead to hopelessness and despair if not properly addressed. Hopelessness and despair are associated with substance misuse, depression, and even suicide. However, meaning in life is negatively correlated with suicidal ideations and attempts, suggesting that having meaning in life makes life worth living.⁴ A sense of meaning in life during this strange and uneasy time can buffer against the negative effects of uncertainty, stress, helplessness, and lack of hope.³

*Having meaning in life
makes life worth living.*

There are five components of meaning in life:²

1. **Felt Senses:** When asked the question, "Does your life have meaning?" people instinctively and immediately answer yes or no. This sense of meaning is hard to articulate and explain, yet it's a shared sense we all have.

2. **Mattering & Significance** is about whether you feel like you matter to others and others matters to you; the notion that the world is different because I/others are here; the feeling that you've done something significant; knowing you were here, you existed, you made a difference.
3. **Purpose/Goals/Engagement** is the feeling that you have something to accomplish or that you've accomplished something in life; being totally engaged in something (job, hobby, vocation, volunteering, random acts of kindness). This could be ordinary and does not necessitate the need to be "well known" in order to feel accomplished.
4. **Coherence** is about making sense out of the world, knowing where you fit into the world, having insight into yourself and your place in the world. Coherence is something all humans strive for.
5. **Reflectivity** is thinking about meaning. If we didn't think about meaning, we wouldn't have it! Asking: "Who am I? What do I want?" This helps to construct sense of meaning and pull from the other four components.

Coronavirus Got You Questioning?

Regardless of how you make meaning during coronavirus, you may feel compelled to reflect on your past choices, actions, and the way in which you live.

So how do you make meaning in your life? Simply put, you can make meaning by paying attention to the choices you make and being aware of the reason you made that choice. Take time to reflect on your life and ask yourself if what you're doing in this life is what you actually *want*. Ask yourself how you can prosper within your constrained circumstances.² Your meaning in life may be called into question at certain developmental milestones (i.e.

graduating college and joining the workforce, finding a partner to settle down with) or when your perception of the world gets disrupted by a negative event (i.e. divorce, death of a loved one, the world enduring a pandemic). Because this event doesn't make sense with your previous perception of the world, you may think deeply about its meaning and reevaluate your meaning in relation to this new reality. For example, you may be struggling to understand you own personal meaning of coronavirus (whether it's about withstanding a furlough or layoff, being responsible for homeschooling, feeling lonely from social isolation, etc.). Or you may be struggling to understand the larger global meaning of the pandemic (your idea of the overall meaning of life and how coronavirus fits into that idea). Making meaning of a negative event can happen in two ways: through assimilation (reframing the meaning of a personal situation to fit with your larger, global meaning) or accommodation (reframing your global meaning in the face of an adverse situation).⁵ Regardless of how you make meaning during coronavirus, you may feel compelled to reflect on your past choices, actions, and the way in which you live. This naturally draws upon your individual meaning as you think deeply about the direction your life is heading.² Take this as an opportunity to reflect upon your values and prioritize what's most important to you. Do this now for a moment. What have you come up with?

Making Meaning with Others

Chances are, a family member, friend, coworker, or pet came to mind. Again, you're not alone. Humans are instinctively social creatures and social connections are one of the most powerful predictors of a quality life. People often report that family and friends evoke a strong sense of meaning in their lives. What's more, meaningful relationships are associated with the other person deriving benefits from you.⁶ In other words, relationships are more meaningful when you give more than you take. The bottom line: *Practicing kindness towards others can increase the quality of your relationships and meaning in your life.* Try some of these ways to give creatively and make meaning during coronavirus (adapted from [inspire kindness](#)):

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1. Check in on your neighbors. Even leaving a voicemail will let them know someone is thinking of them.
2. Be generous: donate extra supplies to first responders or leave a larger tip than usual for your take out.
3. Be a source of positivity and laughter for loved ones. Listen to music. Have a virtual dance party with friends.
4. Reconnect with old friends. Schedule video chats with loved ones.

The past several weeks have been extremely challenging for a variety of reasons and in many different capacities. Now that the initial shock of these circumstances may have subsided, you're likely inclined to make meaning of them. I encourage you to reflect and take inventory of your life at this point. I encourage you to reach out to loved ones and make meaningful and genuine connection. While we may not have all the answers, we may find the strength to make meaning during coronavirus with help from one another.

References

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Acknowledgments

My thanks to Dr. Shannon Monnat for help editing this brief.

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The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.