

Psyche & Soul 29

ENHANCING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH MEANINGFUL LIVING

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this weekend's podcast I shall continue exploration of mental health and wellbeing by looking at the role of meaningful living

An important resource for our mental wellbeing is finding life meaningful and purposeful, even in the midst of tragedy.

Recent research on health and happiness show that a sense of meaning in life is one of the major contributors to emotional and physical wellbeing. Psychologists call finding meaningfulness in life creating "Coherence." Coherence, is founded in the deeply human desire to make sense of the world. Trauma, such as caused by Covid-19, fragments our basic assumptions about life, especially of safety, security, predictability and a benevolent universe. When this happens, meaningfulness of life can get diluted or even disappear altogether. We can gradually sink into clinical depression and sometimes think of ending our life and even attempt to do so.

Meaningfulness is essential to sustain our wellbeing. We need to recreate meaning in the midst fragmentation, disappointments and frustrations that are part of our live, especially these days.

When we find some meaning in the midst of personal tragedy it improves our mental health. Based on his extensive research on expressive writing, Psychologist James Pennebaker observes that when people write about traumatic experiences and reorganize these experiences into coherent and meaningful narratives, their psychological health and well-being increases.

Something Meaningful to Do

When we have something meaningful to do, something we enjoy doing, life becomes meaningful, satisfying, fulfilling. When we do not have it, we feel frustrated, unhappy, become sour with life. Loss of meaning and purpose is at the root of depression and suicidality. Finding life meaningful is antidote to depressive and suicidal ideation.

Something to Look Forward

While having something to do in the present, having something to which we can look forward with hope and some certainty, such as getting a new job, or getting a promotion, finding a spouse and looking forward to a happy married life, or getting ordained a priest adds to the meaningfulness of life.

Having something to which we can look forward gives us a feeling of control over our lives and boosts our self-esteem, enhances our wellbeing. It makes it much easier for us to triumph over present difficulties and problems and maintaining our sanity and serenity.

Reaching Out to Others

Reaching out to others, making others' lives significant, is one of the major ways that we can bring meaningfulness into our own lives. Personality psychologist Dan McAdams observes that goals that enhance the future of humanity as a whole contributes in special way to health and happiness. There is much research that says that when we engage in acts of kindness and compassion it can create positive emotions in us which in turn boost of our mental wellbeing.

Questions to Ask

Psychologists Craig Polizzi and colleagues suggest some questions that can help us create meaning and purpose: What is important to me? What makes me feel good, even when confronted with a situation I can't fully control? What do I want other people to say about me and how I respond to painful situations? What do I want to be known for? What is it to which I look forward with eagerness? The answers to these questions often reveal to us our deeper motivations and what really matters to us. This enables us to pursue meaningful goals and activities under the darkest of circumstances and achieve a resilient outcome and maintain long-term psychological wellbeing (*Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 2020 17, 2, p. 61)

Daily experiences of positive meaning come in several forms. Psychologist Barbara Frederickson cites some of these based on her many years of research. The most frequently reported forms include: feeling connected to others and cared about (22%), having an opportunity to be distracted from every day cares (21%), feeling a sense of achievement, pride, or self-esteem (17%), feeling hope or optimism (13%), and receiving affirmation or validation from others (11%).

The Religious Worldview

Many persons find meaning in the midst of suffering through their religious worldview. Belief in an afterlife sustains many to remain undisturbed in the face of impending death. Gordon Allport, the founder-father of personality psychology had observed a long time ago: "The religious sentiment...is the portion of the personality that arises at the core...and for this reason is capable of conferring marked integration upon personality"

Contemporary personality psychologist Robert Emmons, echoes Allport: "Religion and spirituality can provide a unifying philosophy of life and serve as an integrating and stabilizing force in the face of constant environmental and cultural pressures that push for fragmentation, particularly in post-modern cultures."

We have to find our own ways to find meaningfulness in life. Without it mental wellbeing would be a challenge.

Nandita (name changed), a long term client of mine has frequently struggled with meaningfulness of her life. She recently expressed the following that shows how not finding meaning in life affects one's wellbeing. She wrote:

"One existential query about meaning of life/universe that I have been struggling with and for which I can't see a possibility of an answer within my reach, still has me in its grip. It has set in a kind of inertia. On the surface life is going on in the way possible under current circumstances but deep down there is a sense of existence being non-sensical. I came across the following during my readings, which exactly describes what I am presently experiencing: 'For humans to be able to live they must either not see the infinite, or have such an explanation of the meaning of life as will connect the finite with the infinite.'

The desire is to get an automatic tailor-made answer that brings with it an instant clarity of purpose, passion in its act and potential for a sense of fulfillment – so that life can move on meaningfully. ...

I need to overcome my inner inertia emerging from lack of trust in being able to ever find a meaning in life through this ocean of unknowing."

Introspection and Prayer

We could now take a few moments to ask ourselves: What gives meaning and purpose to my life? If I am experiencing meaninglessness at this time, what is it I can do to create meaning and purpose?

We could offer to our ever present and compassionate God who has our welfare and wellbeing at heart, whatever is causing meaninglessness in our lives and listen to what God might tell us as to how we can enhance meaningfulness in our lives and thereby improve our mental health and wellbeing.....

Have a meaningful weekend.

Be well. Be safe. Be blessed.

Thank you for listening.

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