Much of the effort expended in the medical and social sciences seems to follow an implicit notion that all people desire is a life free from pain, suffering and distress. Our collective effort has identified unending legions of threats, from viruses and bacteria to personal depression and global recession. Without diminishing the importance of identifying and attempting to ameliorate such threats, the past few decades have seen an unprecedented eruption of research that looks less at what people might want to avoid and more at what they might truly desire in life. Perhaps people want not only an absence of sickness but also their share of health. Perhaps people desire not only relief from the sinking pull of psychological suffering but also the buoyancy of psychological wellbeing. And perhaps people not only want to avoid the annihilation of existential emptiness but also strive for lives rich in meaning and purpose. This chapter wholeheartedly embraces these ideas and provides a brief overview of what we know about how finding and pursuing meaning in life may help ameliorate suffering and promote wellbeing.

What Is Meaning in Life?

The title of this chapter is “Meaning in Life and Wellbeing.” We shall see that “meaning” is really the umbrella term that spans key concepts, such as “significance” and “purpose.” There is the greatest consensus around defining meaning in life as “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life” (Steger, 2009, p. 682). What this definition really expresses is that the way that social scientists study meaning in life focuses on people’s ability to comprehend or understand their life experiences and feel the drive and motivation of some grand, overarching life purpose (or purposes and missions). Most of the past 60 years of research have used a definition of meaning in life that fits well with the one presented here, embracing a cognitive component (making sense of life) and a motivational component (pursuing purpose). More recently, a handful of scholars have made an effort to flesh out a third component of meaning that often seemed implicit in earlier definitions. These new efforts hinge somewhat on the multiple meanings of the word “significance.” Significance can be used to refer to the interpretative and communicative qualities of something, as in the way that signs and signals are meant to communicate interpretable information (Steger et al., 2006). This would represent the cognitive component that long has been included in defining meaning in life. Significance also can be used to refer to the value or importance of something, as in the way

---

Wellbeing, Recovery and Mental Health, ed. Mike Slade, Lindsay Oades and Aaron Jarden. Published by Cambridge University Press. © Mike Slade, Lindsay Oades and Aaron Jarden 2017

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 54.70.40.11, on 08 Mar 2019 at 09:29:09, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339275.008
that having a baby can be a significant life event (Martela and Steger, 2015). George and Park (2013) call this component “mattering” and use it to suggest that one’s life must be seen to have some value and worthwhileness for it to be meaningful. In other words, a meaningful life must be seen to matter. This new line of inquiry would seek to establish an evaluative component of meaning to join the cognitive and motivational ones (Heintzelman and King, 2014b). As Steger (2012) put it three years after his previous definition, “meaning in life necessarily involves people feeling that their lives matter, making sense of their lives, and determining a broader purpose for their lives” (p. 177). Thus, meaning in life captures the human capacity to make sense of life, to pursue purpose and to lead a life that is worthwhile and important.

**What Is the Connection between Meaning in Life and Wellbeing?**

Especially when contrasted with feeling that life is pointless, confusing, and worthless, it sounds pretty good to instead be able to find meaning in one’s life. It should not be a surprise, then, that hundreds of scientific studies have firmly linked meaning in life to lesser suffering and greater wellbeing, both psychologically and physically (Steger, 2012). On top of that, research has begun to show that people who report greater meaning in life are better relationship partners, neighbors, and citizens. In fact, several of the most prominent theories of wellbeing and human flourishing consider meaning in life to be a fundamental cornerstone of happiness and the best life people can attain (e.g. Diener and Seligman, 2004; Ryan and Deci, 2001; Ryff and Singer, 1998). In this section, I review research connecting meaning in life with psychological, physical and social wellbeing.

Meaning in life is associated with more frequent and intense experiences of positive emotions and vitality (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988; Kennedy et al., 1994; Keyes et al., 2002; King et al., 2006; Ryff, 1989; Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008c; Steger et al., 2015a; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). Feeling better makes enjoying life easier, and meaning is related to a wide range of broad indicators of happiness and positive adjustment in life in many countries around the world (Bonebright et al., 2000; Debats, 1996; Debats et al., 1993; Fry, 2000, 2001; Garfield, 1973; O’Conner and Vallerand, 1998; Reker, 2002; Reker et al., 1987; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Scannell et al., 2002; Shek, 1995; Shin et al., 2005; Steger et al., 2008b; Steger et al., 2008d; Thompson et al., 2003; Wong, 1998; Zika and Chamberlain, 1987; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). In the end, people who feel like their lives are more meaningful also are more satisfied with their lives (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988; Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2006; Steger and Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2006; Steger and Kashdan, 2006; Steger et al., 2008b).

On a more personal level, those who find their lives to be meaningful express more positive feelings and opinions about themselves, too. They score higher on measures of self-esteem, self-acceptance, and positive self-image (Debats, 1996; Garfield, 1973; Phillips et al., 1974; Ryff, 1989; Shek, 1992; Steger et al., 2008c). These results are not just for lucky people who have grown up in a world of self-congratulation and positive feedback; the link between meaning in life and more positive self-worth appears among people who are living quite outside the mainstream, either by choice as in novice Dominican nuns (Crumbaugh et al., 1970), by necessity as in nursing home residents (O’Conner and Vallerand, 1998) or by adjudication as in prisoners (Reker, 1977).

Although it is wonderful and desirable to feel good about one’s life and one’s self, meaning does not appear to be just fairy dust, helping people prop up phony smiles and inflated perceptions of self-importance. Instead, meaning also is related to psychological maturity and...
development, including greater self-actualization, personal growth, ego strength, self-control and responsibility (Ebersole and Quiring, 1991; Furrow et al., 2004; Garfield, 1973; Phillips, 1980; Reker, 1977; Reker and Peacock, 1981; Ryff, 1989; Shek, 1992; Tryon and Radzin, 1972). This psychological maturity may fuel a greater willingness to take charge in one’s life. Research shows that meaning is positively related to having an internal locus of control and negatively related to having an external or chance locus of control (Newcomb and Harlow, 1986; Ryff, 1989; Thompson et al., 2003). With this in mind, it is no wonder that people high in meaning report a greater degree of autonomy, ambition and mastery in their lives (Debats et al., 1993; Reid, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Shek, 2001; Steger et al., 2008). There is no evidence, however, that meaning fuels an adversarial or domineering approach to life. Rather, meaning is linked to a positive perception of and approach to the world as well as an optimistic orientation toward the future (Acuff and Allen, 1970; Reker, 1977; Reker and Peacock, 1981; Sharpe and Viney, 1973; Simon et al., 1998; Steger et al., 2008). A meaningful life is a life of hope, optimism, and striving for a better future (Mascaro and Rosen, 2005; Mascaro and Rosen, 2006; Mascaro et al., 2004; Steger, 2006; Steger and Frazier, 2005; Thompson and Pitts, 1993). It may be that successfully overcoming difficulty in the past makes it easier to foresee and pursue a positive future. Indeed, people high in meaning report more effective coping skills and better adjustment following trauma (Debats et al., 1995; Edwards and Holden, 2001; Jim et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008a; Stevens et al., 1987).

The mind–body connection has been an increasingly influential idea in the science and practice of human health. Due to the extensive and well-documented associations that meaning in life demonstrates with psychological health, we should expect a similar trend for physical health. Indeed, as one recent review determined, there are dozens of studies showing that people who feel their lives are meaningful enjoy better physical health (Roepke et al., 2014). This relationship takes many different forms, including subjective measures of how people rate their own health. Using this approach, research has found positive relations between meaning in life and better subjective health among cancer patients (Brady et al., 1999), cancer survivors (Jim and Anderson, 2007), Alzheimer’s disease patients (Boyle et al., 2012) and smoking cessation patients (Steger et al., 2009a). Results concerning subjective measures of health mirror those using more objective, biology-based measures, including physiological indicators of immune system functioning (Krause and Hayward, 2012) and stress response (Ishida and Okada, 2006).

From a psychological point of view, meaning may help support health because those who feel their lives are more meaningful should be more likely to take care of themselves (e.g. Steger et al., 2015a). Research supports this hypothesis, showing that those high in meaning have better nutritional and dietary habits (Piko and Brassai, 2009), engage in more physical activity (Brassai et al., 2015; Holahan et al., 2011), and have healthier attitudes toward sexual prophylactic use (Steger et al., 2015a). Further, they engage in lower levels of substance use (Brassai et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2011). These habits also appear to extend into the ways in which people utilize the health care system itself. A large study of a representative sample of American older adults showed that those higher in meaning and purpose were more likely to engage in recommended preventative health care services, such as getting cholesterol or mammogram tests, and perhaps as a consequence also spent fewer nights in hospitals (Kim et al., 2014). Reduced hospital stays might indicate a profound economic benefit to meaning in life. Using the United States as just one example, in 2011 alone, the total cost of hospital stays was roughly $387 billion (Pfuntner et al., 2012). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, people who feel their lives are meaningful have a lower risk of dying and have longer lives (Boyle et al., 2009; Krause, 2009).
Section 1: Where Are We Now?

So far, then, this chapter has shown that people living a meaningful life are very likely to be happier, more positive and more psychologically mature, anticipate brighter futures, take care of their health better, feel better physically and enjoy all of these qualities for a longer period of time before death. But meaning is not seen to be a commodity, something to be selfishly hoarded or flaunted. Meaning is supposed to be shared. Most scholars agree that there is an inherent self-transcendence to meaning in life, such that meaning increases as people's concerns expand beyond their own interests to include the stakes of other people, other groups, and perhaps even all of life and the universe around them (e.g. Reker and Chamberlain, 2000). Because of this theoretical emphasis on a meaningful life including others, there should be no surprise that time and again, research has revealed that relationships of one sort or the other are the most commonly nominated source of meaning in people's lives (Steger et al., 2013). This research usually asks people to list, or alternatively to rate an existing list, of things that might make their lives meaningful, yielding a lot of richness and texture on how meaning seems relevant to individuals. At the same time, research specifically focusing on what it is about relationships that seems to benefit meaning in life has been relatively sparse (O'Donnell et al., 2014). There are some important clues, however.

Being rejected or ostracized, or feeling excluded, cause reduce perceived meaning in life (e.g. Williams et al., 2002), whereas meaning in life is higher on days when people feel more close and connected to others (Steger and Kashdan, 2009). Family appears to be an especially important source of connection (Delle Fave et al., 2013), and both perceived family cohesion and family satisfaction are positively related to meaning in life (Lightsey and Sweeney, 2008). Within romantic relationships, meaning in life is positively linked to marital satisfaction and marital adjustment (Shek, 1994), better communication between spouses (Kalantarkousheh and Hassan, 2010) and sexual satisfaction (McCann and Biaggio, 1989) and negatively linked to sexual frustration (Sallee and Casciani, 1976). Outside of one's family, social support and self-reported strength of social bonds are both related to meaning (Dunn and O'Brienn, 2009; Hicks and King, 2009; Krause, 2007), and experiencing meaning in one's workplace is associated with greater trust in managers (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). From these studies it appears that it not only is important to have people in your life and to feel close to them, but it also seems important to have strong and cohesive bonds. Do people high in meaning do anything to maintain such strong bonds or do they merely harvest the fortuitous benefits of being around others? It seems that people high in meaning do give back to their relationships and communities, through volunteering, providing donations, and relationship-improving activities (Steger et al., 2008b).

What Is the Connection between Meaning in Life and Mental Health Recovery?

Finally, as was noted at the beginning of this chapter, more attention has been paid to whether people are experiencing suffering or distress than to whether they are experiencing wellbeing. Ameliorating suffering is a primary goal of many branches of human services, whether this means working to prevent known causes of suffering, such as poverty, inequality and abuse, or helping people to regain functioning through mental health recovery. In this section, research linking meaning in life with psychological distress, disorders and mental health recovery is reviewed.

Meaning in life seems to play a substantial role in reducing psychological suffering. Meaning in life consistently is negatively related to levels of psychological distress and mental
illness, such as symptoms of eating disorders, substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Park, 2010; Steger et al., 2008a; Steger and Kashdan, 2009; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). Much of this research has taken place in the context of recovery from tragic or traumatic life events. In most of these models, meaning is a pivotal variable enabling people to move on and often perceive personal growth following trauma (e.g. Linley and Joseph, 2011; Park, 2010; Steger et al., 2015b).

A separate literature has emerged examining the role of meaning in facilitating recovery from mental illness or psychological disorder. At a theoretical level, meaning is one of the key components of models of psychological recovery. For example, meaning and purpose are identified as key processes within a model of psychological recovery that also includes hope, identity, and responsibility (Andresen et al., 2003). Similarly, meaning is a fundamental part of the CHIME model of recovery (Leamy et al., 2011). CHIME stands for Connectedness, Hope and optimism about the future, Identity, Meaning in life and Empowerment. The role of meaning in these models might center on helping people explore their spiritual or religious lives, develop personal goals in their lives or better understand the nature and best use of their strengths (Slade and Wallace, this volume). These models are borne out by evidence that meaning in life predicts better response to treatment for psychological disorders (e.g. Debats, 1996). Thus, meaning in life is linked to better psychological wellbeing, and also to the recovery of psychological functioning following both traumatic events and psychological disorders.

How Is Meaning in Life Measured?

As the review of research presented above shows, meaning in life already has been established as an important facet of wellbeing, and interest has been growing steadily. To continue to advance meaning in life science and practice, particularly in efforts to help people improve their meaning in life, we must be able to reliably measure it. The first measure of meaning in life appeared in the early 1960s, and new measures have been published periodically. The most popular measures often appear to use slightly different understandings and definitions of their target. For example, the first measure of meaning in life included items addressing energy, despair and suicide, and more recent measures appear to prioritize people’s abilities to set goals for themselves and maintain active lifestyles (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964; Ryff, 1989). Broadening the way in which meaning is measured to include other constructs increases the risk that some of the significant findings yielded by research are due to similarity of the items used rather than to how the variables actually relate to each other. An easy example to use is the relationship between meaning and depression. If the meaning measure asks about despair and suicide, and the depression measure asks about despair and suicide, would it really be earth-shattering if people’s scores were related? It is better to use measures that use a more straightforward approach to assessing meaning (e.g. Reker, 1992; Reker and Peacock, 1981). Sometimes meaning-in-life measures are too long to be used frequently – as in clinical settings to measure treatment progress – or in large, representative samples. Some meaning-in-life assessments also have struggled to achieve reasonable psychometric quality, particularly with regard to whether they have a consistent factor structure (e.g. Steger, 2006, 2007).

These issues were the impetus that led me to develop a meaning-in-life measure that could provide simple, straightforward assessment partnered with psychometric properties that met the highest standards. Research so far has been encouraging, but you do not have to
take my word for it. According to an independent review, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) was the only meaning-in-life measure of dozens that warranted a perfect score based on rigor of development and demonstrated psychometric quality (Brandstätter et al., 2012). Others have presented evidence showing that the MLQ has been used to assess more people than other leading meaning-in-life instruments (Heintzelman and King, 2014b). The MLQ is a simple, straightforward tool that assesses both how meaningful people perceive their lives to be and also how intently people feel they are searching for more meaning in their lives (Steger et al., 2008c, 2011). Brief versions, generally consisting of three items assessing the extent of meaning in people's lives, have been used by governmental agencies for public health epidemiological research (e.g. Kobau et al., 2010) and by nongovernmental research institutes conducting health research around the globe, particularly in poorer nations (Samman, 2007). In cross-national research, the psychometric properties of the full MLQ (e.g. Steger et al., 2008d) and the short version (Steger and Samman, 2012) have proven to be very good (Steger and Shin, 2010). The primary drawback of the MLQ is that it trades comprehensiveness and richness for brevity and strong psychometric performance.

Conclusion
There has been a profound shift in how a successful, healthy life is seen, from reactive models that emphasize ridding oneself of threats, maladies, damage and flaws to more progressive and holistic models that are concerned with threats and damage, but are equally concerned with potential, opportunity, strength and wellbeing. Meaning in life is a variable of increasing importance that deftly spans both sides of these new models of health and flourishing. As people develop meaning in their lives, they also seem to develop powerful psychological characteristics, generative social and interpersonal relationships, physical health and happiness. Given the surge of research and the ready availability of measurement tools, the role of meaning in future work seeking to foster human wellbeing seems secure.

References


