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Taking on the stress-depression link: Meaning as a resource in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

We investigated how meaning in life affects the link between stress and depression symptoms in adolescents. Adolescents ($N = 177$; 58.4% female, mean age = 14.75 years) reported on their meaning in life, exposure to stressors, and depression symptomatology. Higher meaning in life predicted lower depression symptoms. Importantly, meaning in life moderated the relationship between stress exposure and depressive symptoms: stress exposure was associated with higher depression when meaning in life was low, when meaning in life was high, there was no association between stressors and depression. These findings indicate the importance of having a sense of meaning in life adolescence. A positive relationship was found between stress exposure and depression symptomatology levels at a time-point seven months earlier. This lends a longitudinal perspective; meaning in life moderated a relationship that had been present for seven months. Therapeutic implications for protecting at-risk youth are discussed.

Adolescence is a vulnerable period of development, during which youths are prone to experiencing stress and depression (Thapar, Collishaw, Pine, & Thapar, 2012). Stress, a key factor in the etiology of depression (Hammen, 2005), is almost unavoidable for adolescents who by nature of their developmental status face constant challenges of social role definition and increased responsibility in addition to other potential environmental strains (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Having meaning in life is associated with well-being in adolescents (Halama & Dedová, 2007; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), suggesting that meaning in life may mitigate the negative effects of stressors on affective well-being. With the goal of integrating meaning in life as a resource into the stress-depression connection, here we examine directly how meaning in life affects the relationship between stress and depression in youths, specifically looking at relationships between meaning in life, stress exposure, and depressive symptomatology in adolescents.

1. Stress and depression

Major depressive disorder consists of lowered mood and decreases in energy and emotional reactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is a complex disorder, with a myriad of factors motivating its onset including genetic predisposition (Sullivan, Neale, & Kendler, 2000), neurochemical regulation (Werner & Coveñas, 2013), psychological schemas (Beck & Haigh, 2014), and social and environmental circumstances (Monroe & Hadjiyannakis, 2002). Among the environmental causes, chronic or extreme acute stress exposure is among the most heavily emphasized and researched. Numerous studies find major stressful events to precede the onset of depressive episodes (reviewed in Mazure, 1998), and have established a link between stress exposure and depression

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symptomatology (reviewed in [Hammen, 2005](#); [Monroe & Hadjiyannakis, 2002](#); [Paykel, 2003](#)).

Models of the stress-depression relationship highlight the importance of how stressors are perceived cognitively. Under the generic cognitive model, a person's interpretations of stressors can create negative self-referential beliefs, schemas that bias information processing once activated ([Beck & Haigh, 2014](#)). Accordingly, some cognitive appraisals of stressors are particularly likely to facilitate the development of depression ([Beck & Haigh, 2014](#); [Disner, Beevers, Haigh, & Beck, 2011](#)). Meaning in life, as a culmination of cognitive and affective assessments of one's life, may weaken the role of cognitive appraisals in fostering depression.

2. Meaning as a buffer in the stress-depression link

Meaning in life refers to how coherent, purposeful, and significant a person feels their life to be. Synthesizing a vast literature, meaning in life can be defined as a person's ability to comprehend their life circumstances, their possession of motivating and life-organizing goals, and their feeling that their life is of importance ([Martela & Steger, 2016](#)). Daily events are interpreted in their larger significance towards meaning in life, i.e. stressors can be evaluated for relevance to a person's overall understanding of the meaning of their life. Models of depression emphasize the appraisal of stressors in context of meaning in life to determine whether these stressors will lead to psychological harm ([Beck & Haigh, 2014](#)). Negative views of the self, the world, and the future, known as the negative cognitive triad, have been associated with vulnerability for depression in adults ([Beck & Perkins, 2001](#)) and in adolescents ([Braet, Wante, Van Beveren, & Theuwis, 2015](#)), indicating the importance of a person's broad beliefs about their life and circumstances in mental health.

To this end, having personal meaning in life structures may provide a context for understanding and integrating stressful situations. It is each person's ability to decide what makes their life meaningful. Thus, meaning in life represents a malleable cognitive-emotional framework, directly accessible to subjective evaluation based on one's own needs and values ([Steger, 2009](#); [Yalom, 1980](#)). The pragmatic malleability of the meaning in life framework makes it a particularly promising route through which depression-facilitating cognitions may be resisted or reframed.

3. Meaning in life and well-being

Supporting the idea that meaning in life can be beneficial for psychological health, having meaning in life is widely regarded as critical for well-being ([Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006](#)). Meaning in life has been positively associated with self-satisfaction ([Reker & Cousins, 1979](#)), life satisfaction ([Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010](#); [Reker, 1977](#)), acceptance of death ([Durlak, 1972](#)), happiness ([Park et al., 2010](#)), and subjective well-being ([Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992](#)). While investigations regarding the importance of existential questions in adolescent samples have been sparse ([Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2012](#)), recent studies indicate that meaning in life can promote adolescent well-being in the United States ([Kiang & Fuligni, 2010](#)) and other countries ([Halama & Dedová, 2007](#); [Ho et al., 2010](#); [Hong, 2008](#); [Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012](#)).

In addition to being conducive to well-being, meaning in life appears to help people avoid depressive symptomatology. People who report higher life meaning endorse lower depressive symptomatology ([Kleifaras & Psarra, 2012](#); [Mascaro & Rosen, 2005, 2008](#); [Park et al., 2010](#)). This effect has been shown in a variety of populations including HIV patients ([Lyon & Younger, 2001](#)), cancer survivors ([Simonelli, Fowler, Maxwell, & Andersen, 2008](#)), and clinically depressed persons ([Thakur & Basu, 2010](#)). Interventions for increasing meaning in life have repeatedly shown to lower depression ([Bohlmeijer, Smit, & Cuijpers, 2003](#); [Cho, Bernstein, Roh, & Chen, 2013](#); [Hsieh & Wang, 2003](#)).

In addition to the associations of meaning in life with improved well-being and resistance to depression, it has also been directly associated with lessened stressor impact. Meaning in life predicts decreases in symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder in adults (PTSD; [Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009](#)), and discovering meaning in life from trauma and combat events predicts decreased PTSD symptomatology ([Currier, Holland, Chisty, & Allen, 2011](#); [Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008](#)). Further, interventions to increase meaning in life have been demonstrated to improve PTSD symptoms and aid coping. Meaning interventions, focused on resolving religious discomfort and encouraging religious meaning-making, have been successfully applied to treat combat-related PTSD in survivors of military trauma ([Harris et al., 2011](#)).

Additional support for the connection between meaning in life and stress resistance exists in the coping literature. Much attention has been given to the benefits of posttraumatic growth (PTG), defined as obtaining a greater understanding of one's life, values, spirituality, and personal strength after experiencing a trauma ([Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004](#)). Meaning-making coping, coping with stressors by exploring how the stressor contains and can lead to meaning in life, is a central mechanism in the process of PTG in trauma survivors ([Larner & Blow, 2011](#)). Adaptively creating life meaning out of an experience with cancer has been related to better psychological adjustment in cancer survivors ([Park, Edmondson, Fenster, & Blank, 2008](#)). Meaning-making coping has been shown to mediate the relationship between religion and college students' adjustment to loss ([Park, 2005](#)), indicating that religion influences loss adjustment by providing a source of meaning in life. There is also evidence that beneficial emotional support from social ties functions partially by reinforcing one's sense of meaning in life ([Krause, 2004](#)). This demonstrates that meaning in life may underlie some factors in the coping process. The association of meaning in life with well-being and resilience implies a role of meaning in life for resisting stressor impact, a role that may be especially suited to support coping with the challenges of transition in adolescence.

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