



Well@Work Podcast Episode 21: Meaning Making

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast Dr Jessica Eslinger discusses the concept of meaning making and applies it to the COVID-19 pandemic. And now, Dr Jessica Eslinger.

As a community, we've now weathered so many months of living with the COVID-19 pandemic. Very few among us would have been able to predict how our day-to-day lives would be affected by COVID-19. We've had to adapt to a multitude of changes. We've turned our homes into classrooms, we've gone virtual in all aspects of our lives, we've learned to don masks, wash our hands for 20 seconds, and socially distance from others. We've had to adapt to not being able to see or hug our loved ones and friends. And for many, have dealt with financial, job, and food insecurity. Many have had family and friends diagnosed with COVID or have experienced the virus themselves; sadly, many have lost loved ones and friends to the virus. For those of us working within the behavioral health and health care, we've had to change the ways we offer support to our clients and the ways in which we connect with and give support to our colleagues. Many of us have had to make decisions and follow protocols within the workplace that have led to moral distress. We've had to adjust to a new reality. And for many, this adjustment has been difficult, involving a myriad of losses; of safety of ourselves and our loved ones, loss of social and emotional support of others, and most significantly loss of life.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust Survivor and psychotherapist, wrote in his seminal book "Man's Search for Meaning," that the primary motivation of personhood is our search for meaning within our lives. Who of us during this pandemic have not asked ourselves "why has this happened?" Or "how will this experience affect me and others going forward?" As part of the human race, we appear to be hardwired to search for patterns and reasons that help us explain and understand our lives. Dr Crystal Park's research at the University of Connecticut can help us understand our need to create meaning out of our experiences during times of crisis or trauma. Her model of meaning making identifies two levels of meaning: global, which refers to our core beliefs, values, and desires, and situational, which involves our appraisals of a situation. Distress occurs when there's a discrepancy between our appraised meaning of an experience and our existing core beliefs and understandings. We then work to decrease this discrepancy by creating coherence by either changing our appraisals of the experience or changing or adjusting our core beliefs. Research on meaning making has found that this process can improve adjustment during times of difficulty or loss. Some of the benefits of meaning making include decreased feelings of distress and increased feelings of personal control. Making meaning out of difficult experiences can promote resiliency, which has been found to help mitigate the development of secondary traumatic stress and other types of stress.

Let's consider Vivian. Vivian works as a mental health therapist, she's been working from home for the last 10 months and has been balancing her nine-year-old's school needs. She's been seeing her clients via telehealth and many of them are struggling with depressed

mood and anxiety exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her mother lives in a nursing home and, while she's been able to see her, she's not been able to hug her for months. She wears a mask outside of her home, has limited contact with friends and other family, and thinks about the risk of COVID infection daily. Lately she's been wondering if things will ever get back to normal and whether she'll be ever feel comfortable in a room full of people again. What can help Vivian adjust to her experiences during this pandemic? Here are three tips that can help us engage in practices that help us make meaning out of our experiences during COVID-19.

Tip number one: make time to practice self-reflection. Slowing down your mind and allowing yourself to think deeply about your beliefs and feelings connected to your experiences can be difficult in the rush of any given day. To work towards understanding how we've been affected by the pandemic and the ways in which we can and are moving forward it is helpful to allow our brain space to slow down and focus on our thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses. Consider scheduling a time every day to engage in self-reflection and write down your observations. Reflecting on these thoughts can help us see patterns and underlying themes that can help us make meaning of our experiences.

Tip number two: examine your core beliefs about what's occurred during this pandemic. Integrating new understandings into existing beliefs can create coherence and help individuals weather change and loss. Here are a few questions that can help guide you. What beliefs about yourself or others have changed or been challenged during the pandemic? What personal or spiritual beliefs or values have helped you understand your experiences during COVID-19? What are the moments when you feel very connected to your work and those around you? Why are these connections so important to you?

Tip number three: notice and write down the things that you feel hopeful and optimistic about for the future. Our ability to discover these positive aspects of life is an important part of who we are and how we balance negativity. Many may be surprised at their ability to identify positive changes that have resulted from this pandemic, such as increased time with family or bonding with a new pet. Hopefulness about the future has been found to be protective of mental health distress, secondary traumatic stress, and other conditions such as burnout. And if we're going about the business of meaning making, it's important for us to add all of the elements to our story.

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