



2017

Confused Existentialism as a Factor in College Students' Depression

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2017) "Confused Existentialism as a Factor in College Students' Depression," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol12/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Confused Existentialism as a Factor in College Students' Depression

Chaz A. Rich
Brigham Young University

Abstract:

Although “meaning in life” and “existentialism” may be considered ambiguous in psychology, the former term became a psychological construct with implications for psychological well-being. In young adulthood, the transition to college can be a difficult process because of social pressures incident to the adjustment to adulthood, including the need to establish an adult identity. Consequently, meaning in life may be overlooked in the confusion. I argue that a focus on meaning in life can be beneficial for college students in moderating their short- and long-term perspectives, physical health, and emotional health.

*Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate
Journal of Psychology*

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

Until the 1950s, “meaning in life” was an ambiguous concept that had rarely appeared in the psychological literature (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). However, the concept gained wide notice with the publication of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* in 1946 (Frankl, 1946/2006). As a prison-camp survivor in the Jewish Holocaust of World War II, Frankl had observed men and women pushed to their emotional and physical breaking points by cruel disconnection from the lives they had known earlier. Later, as a practicing psychiatrist, Frankl concluded that prisoners who recognized a purpose for their suffering had not succumbed to chronic depression and suicide. Although a person might suffer severe and sustained loss, there were those who had maintained feeling and who acted in ways that brought them meaning in life.

Frankl’s book and his accompanying logotherapy focused on meaning in life and its relation to psychological well-being. Logotherapy was founded on the claim that mental illness stems from an “existential vacuum” (p. 106), that is, from a lack of meaning. The therapy was designed to help the existentially confused individual discover personal meaning in her or his life and return to a state of mental equilibrium (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Robatmili et al., 2015).

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

Despite initial interest in logotherapy, critics found it authoritarian in its conclusions and unduly biased by Frankl's traumatic experience in the concentration camps (Lancaster & Carlson, 2015,). Nonetheless, it has remained a major influence in existential psychology (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and more recently has reemerged in research on the psychological benefits of establishing a purpose in life (Steger et al., 2015; Zhang, Shi, Liu, & Miao, 2014).

Adjusting to College Life

Leaving the comforts of home to enroll in a college or university is a common practice in much of the world. In addition to further one's formal education, college has become a crucial period during which young adults further develop a sense of self and a meaning in life, (Mohanty, Pradhan, & Jena, 2015; Steger, Fitch-Martin, Donnelly, & Rickard, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013). Although the transition is relatively easy for some students, it is daunting others, especially for those unfamiliar with living independently. Feeling overwhelmed and beleaguered is a common experience.

Rates of depressive symptoms have increased in US college students. Schnetzer, Schulenberg, and Buchanan (2013)

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

reported that 30% of students indicated having serious depressive symptoms. Students have cited stress caused by their studies, their employment, and peer pressure as a major factor in depression. Many have acknowledged using self-medication for stress, including alcohol and other substances (Meisel & Palfai, 2015; Schnetzler, 2013). Excessive drinking has even been associated with diminished academic performance and increased promiscuous behavior and physical injury (Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Fazel, & Resurreccion, 2012; Meisel & Palfai, 2015).

The Influence of Meaning in Life in College Students' Short- and Long-term Outlooks

Meaning in life can affect individuals' views of life on a daily basis as well as in the long term. According to Machell, Kashdan, Short, and Nezlek (2015), they found that meaning in life is influenced by personal identity, goals, and felt responsibility. Developing a sense of one's identity continues during the college years and gives direction to one's college life and to life beyond college (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). To the extent that new students are surrounded by peers from other states and countries, majors, and cultural backgrounds, they may feel

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

pressures to alter the personal values they arrived with identity in order to better fit in with others (Abeyta, Routledge, Juhl, & Robinson, 2015; Robotmili et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). Consequently, the personal identity they entered college with may consolidate with others' identities, thus altering the meaning in life they entered with. In the extreme, they may lose such meaning (Machell et al., 2015) and embrace a form of nihilism. Formulating and maintaining goals are also part of college life, given the deadlines and responsibilities it brings (Mohanty et al., 2015). Feldman and Snyder (2005) observed that meaning in life can be associated with a person's perception of his or her own goal-oriented achievement. Making and following personal goals may also enhance one's understanding of and coping with the evolving environments and expectations that college students confront (Mohanty et al., 2015; Yalcin & Malkoc, 2015). For example, a student focused on getting into medical school and becoming a doctor may cope more effectively with a failed test or a breakup knowing that is working toward something larger. Students may also be more likely to avoid actions that would jeopardize their meaning in life, especially when that meaning is largely defined by their goals (Meisel & Palfai, 2015).

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

Responsibility for one's meaning in life may also influence short- and long-term outlooks. For Frankl, "creative, experiential, and attitudinal" values contribute to meaning in life (as cited by Robotmili et al., 2015, p. 5). Having a sense of who one is as a student is and what one wants to do with one's life may enhance one's felt responsibility to pursue one's goals and thereby sustain one's meaning in life (Mohanty et al., 2015).

Although meaning in life was initially applied to a long-term focus, it may exist and be changed in the short term as well (Machell et al., 2015). To the extent that personal identity, goals, and responsibility are fluid, the extracurricular experiences of college students incident to social gatherings, sororities and fraternities, and clubs may factor into students' daily and future outlooks as much or more than curricular experiences do. They may also contribute to students' depression, including feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness, to a greater extent as well (Feldman & Snyder, 2005)

Meaning in Life in Relation to Health

Meaning in life may also influence the health of college students through the use of leisure time such as recreational sports, watching movies, and otherwise hanging out. Zhang et al.

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

(2014) reported that 96% of students spent time in relaxing or recreational activities. The authors dichotomized these activities as either beneficial or harmful. Beneficial activities, like sports, recreational games, and other social interactions were positive. By contrast, playing video games or watching Netflix were potentially negative in terms of wasted time, social isolation, and poorer health.

Schnetzer et al. (2013) studied levels of alcohol consumption and found that they were much lower in the same age cohort among those not enrolled in college than among those who were. The authors speculated that the stress of rigorous courses, the need for social acceptance, or money worries may induce students to turn to alcohol or other substances in order to cope (see also Zhang et al., 2014). In turn, this reliance may lead to increased violence and unprotected sex as well as to decreased academic performance (Meisel & Palfai, 2015; Steger et al., 2015).

Because meaning in life may lead to a perception that one's life is satisfactory and worth living (Yalcin & Malkoc, 2015), the individual may feel more inclined to adopt healthful practices. Students who decline to use harmful drugs or to binge drink at a party because they do not want to damage their

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

brain or injure their body otherwise may perceive a different meaning in life because they recognize that drug-induced pleasure can have a lasting impact that is not worth the risk, despite seeing their peers drinking for pleasure (Grossbard et al., 2016; Meisel & Palfai, 2015).

Meaning in life may go beyond intangible influences. As a student can recognize that there is more to his or her life than just living for the moment because of meaning, that student may be more likely to care for his or her body by apportioning proper leisure time, moderating drinking levels, and actively taking part in maintaining physical health. If the student does not have a sense of meaning, he or she may be more prone to feel depressed by engaging in activities that seclude themselves from others, use substances that distort their psychological functioning, or not feel motivation or reason in attending to their health.

Meaning in Life in Relation to Emotional Health

Just as meaning in life may influence short- and long-term physical health, it may also be a factor in emotional health. Frankl observed that hope is a primary component of meaning in life (see Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015).

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

For college students, hope may signal the possibility that good will prevail despite stressful and difficult challenges (Lancaster & Carlson, 2015). Having hope contextualizes problems as transient and surmountable. Moreover, students who report being hopeful also often report that they feel happy (Steger et al., 2006; Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015). This conjunction may result from the individual's use of goals to sustain focus and orientation (Mohanty et al., 2015).

Conclusion

As proposed by Frankl and supported by others, the meaning in life plays a role in daily life, including health, and emotional well-being. Because college is a unique experience in which young adults leave the comforts of home, it has the potential for a negative psychological impact on those students who are unprepared for such a dramatic change (Lancaster & Carlson, 2015). The demands of professors, future careers, unfamiliar environments, and personal maintenance mean that students' values, beliefs, choices, and personality may change during the college years and alter their long-term outlook (Mohanty et al., 2015). In particular, the college experience may alter their perception of meaning of life as an adult (Nelson, Willoughby,

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

Rogers, & Padilla-Walker, 2015). Researchers have shown that, for college students, meaning in life may conduce to emotional health by promoting coping with the stress, to new allegiance to personal values, to establishing and maintaining goals, and to hope (Abeyta et al., 2015; Mohanty et al., 2015; Yalçın, & Malkoç, 2015). By contrast, meaning in life may contribute to depression, runaway leisure time, the excessive consumption of alcohol, and other substances, and the forfeiture of values to fit in (Meisel et al., 2015, Robatmili et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014).

It is important for college and university administrators to consider the availability of therapies based on meaning in life (e.g., logotherapy or cognitive behavioral therapy) as well as workshops and extracurricular opportunities designed to enhance hope, goal-setting and goal-achievement, coping with stress, and healthful living (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015).

References

- Abeyta, A. A., Routledge, C., Juhl, J., & Robinson, M. D. (2015). Finding meaning through emotional understanding: Emotional clarity predicts meaning in life and adjustment to existential threat. *Motivation and Emotion*, 39(6), 973-983. doi:10.1007/s11031-015-9500-3
- Feldman, D. B., & Snyder, C. R. (2005). Hope and the meaningful life: Theoretical and empirical associations between

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

- goal-directed thinking and life meaning. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 24(3), 401-421. doi:10.1521/jscp.24.3.401.65616
- Frankl, V.E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning* (original edition published in 1949). MA: Beacon Press.
- Grossbard, J.R., Mastroleo, N. R., Geisner, I. M., Atkins, D., Ray, A. E., Kilmer, J.R., & ...
- Turrisi, R. (2016). Drinking norms, readiness to change, and gender as moderators of a combined alcohol intervention for first-year college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 5275-82. doi:10.1016/j.add-beh.2015.07.028
- Lancaster, S. L., & Carlson, G. C. (2015). Meaning made, distress, and growth: An examination of the integration of stressful life experiences scale. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 22(1), 92-110. doi:10.1037/a0038296
- Nelson, L. J., Willoughby, B. J., Rogers, A. A., & Padilla-Walker, L. M. (2015). "What a view!": Associations between young people's views of the late teens and twenties and indices of adjustment and maladjustment. *Journal of Adult Development*, 22(3). 125-137. doi:10.1007/s10804-015-9206-5
- Machell, K., A., Kashdan, T., B., Short, J., L., & Nezlek, J., B. (2015). Relationships between meaning in life, social and achievement events, and positive and negative affect in daily life. *Journal of Personality*, 83(3), 287-298. doi: 10.1111/jopy.12103
- Maddi, S. R., Harvey, R. H., Khoshaba, D. M., Fazel, M., & Resurreccion, N. (2012). The relationship of hardiness and some other relevant variables to college performance. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 52(2), 190-205. doi:10.1177/0022167811422497
- Meisel, S. N., & Palfai, T. P. (2015). Meaning in life goal pursuit moderates the effects of social influences on college student drinking. *Journal of Applied*

EXESTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

Social Psychology. 45(10),
561-567. doi:10.1111/jasp.12319

Mohanty, A., Pradhan, R. K., & Jena, L. K. (2015). Curiosity and meaning of life leading towards personal growth: The role of emotional intelligence. *Journal of the Indian*

Academy of Applied Psychology, 41(2), 226-235.

Robotmili, S., Sohrabi, F., Shahrak, M. A., Talepasand, S., Nokani, M., & Hasani, M. (2015).

The effect of group logotherapy on meaning in life and depression levels of Iranian

students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 37(1), 54-62.

doi:10.1007/s10447-014-9225-0

Schnitzer, L. W., Schulenberg, S. E., & Buchanan, E. M. (2013).

Differential associations

among alcohol use, depression and perceived meaning in male and female college

students. *Journal of Substance Use*, 18(4), 311-319. doi:10.3109/14659891.2012.661026

Steger, M. F., Fitch-Martin, A. R., Donnelly, J., & Rickard, K. M.

(2015). Meaning in life and

health: Proactive health orientation links meaning in life to health variables among

American undergraduates. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(3), 583-597,

doi:10.1007/s10902-014-9523-6

Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire:

Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling*

Psychology, 53(1), 80-93. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.80

Yalçın, İ., & Malkoç, A. (2015). The relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-

being: Forgiveness and hope as mediators. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(4), 915-929,

EXISTENTIALISM AND DEPRESSION

doi:10.1007/s10902-014-9540-5

Zhang, S., Shi, R., Liu, X., & Miao, D. (2014). Passion for leisure activity, presence of meaning, and search for meaning: The mediating role of emotion. *Social Indicators Research*, 115(3), 1123-1135. doi:10.1007/s11205-013-0260-8