A meaningful life is worth living: Meaning in life as a suicide resiliency factor

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ABSTRACT

Given the high rate of suicide worldwide, it is imperative to find factors that can confer resiliency to suicide. The goal of the present study was to examine the search for and the presence of meaning in life as possible resilience factors. We hypothesized that the presence of, but not the search for, meaning in life would predict decreased suicidal ideation over an eight-week time period and decreased lifetime odds of a suicide attempt. We also examined a subsidiary hypothesis that the presence of, but not the search for, meaning in life would mediate the relationship between the two variables associated with the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide (i.e., perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness) and suicidal ideation. Our results were generally in support of our hypothesis: presence of meaning in life predicted decreased suicidal ideation over time and lower lifetime odds of a suicide attempt. Surprisingly, search for meaning in life also predicted decreased suicidal ideation over time. Finally, the search for, but not presence of, meaning in life mediated the relationship between the interpersonal psychological theory variables and suicidal ideation. These findings suggest that interventions that target meaning in life may be useful to attenuate suicide risk in individuals.

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1. Introduction

The continuously increasing rate of suicide is a problem of considerable worldwide concern. Indeed, from 1999 to 2010, the rate of suicide in some age groups in the United States has increased by nearly 30% (Sullivan et al., 2013), with similar trends being shown worldwide (Nock et al., 2008). This increased rate of suicide highlights the need for more research on factors that can prevent suicide. Accordingly, our goal is to assess meaning in life as a suicide resiliency factor. In the present study, we examine meaning in life as a prospective predictor of suicidal ideation and a retrospective predictor of suicide attempt status.

1.1. Meaning in life

Meaning in life, although defined in various ways throughout a diverse literature, can be broadly defined as a sense of purpose that is believed to matter in a way beyond the individual living that life (King et al., 2006; Steger, 2009). The most well-supported model of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006) divides meaning in life into two components: the search for meaning in life and the presence of meaning in life. Individuals who do not possess

presence of meaning in life may be searching for it; however, these facets are not mutually exclusive and individuals who do possess meaning in life may still continue to search for a greater or different meaning (Steger et al., 2011). Meaning in life is associated with overall psychological well-being (Ho et al., 2010; McMahan and Renken, 2011) as well as related factors such as positive affect (Hicks and King, 2009; King et al., 2006; Trent et al., 2013). Despite the number of studies that find that meaning in life is associated with increased psychological well-being, there is a relatively paucity of research that applies meaning in life to the study of resiliency, especially resiliency to suicide. Thus, the primary goal of this manuscript is to examine meaning in life as a resiliency factor in suicide.

1.2. Meaning in life and suicide

There is a small, but promising, body of literature linking meaning in life with suicidality. To our best knowledge, only one study has directly assessed the role of meaning in life within the context of suicide. Kleiman et al. (2013a) found that meaning in life mediated the synergistic relationship of gratitude (i.e., a tendency to "notice and appreciate the positive in the world"; Wood et al., 2010, p. 891) and grit (i.e., passionate perseverance towards goals despite adversity; Duckworth et al., 2007), predicting suicidal ideation, and suggesting that meaning in life is a more proximal suicide resiliency factor than either gratitude or grit.

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This study examined meaning in life as a unitary construct; however, examination of the individual constructs of presence of and search for meaning in life is important because, as we discuss later, they may have different relationships with suicidal ideation and attempts. Moreover, interventions targeting meaning in life are found to be effective to reduce suicide risk (Lapierre et al., 2007). Finally, other studies find that purpose in life, a distinct but conceptually related factor to meaning in life, is associated with decreased suicidal ideation (Harlow et al., 1986; Heisel and Flett, 2004). Taken together, these studies suggest that meaning in life may not only be associated with decreased suicidal ideation, but is also modifiable in treatment. Indeed, several interventions currently exist to modify meaning in life (e.g., Lee et al., 2006; Mok et al., 2012; Westerhof et al., 2010). Although these interventions are primarily targeted at cancer patients, it is plausible that such interventions to modify meaning in life may also be effective in other populations, such as those at risk for suicide.

In addition to empirical support, the idea of meaning in life conferring resiliency to suicide is compatible with the frameworks of several theories of suicide. For example, Joiner's interpersonal theory of suicide (IPT; Joiner et al., 2009) finds that the desire to die by suicide is the result of beliefs that one is a burden to others (perceived burdensomeness) and does not belong to a social group (thwarted belongingness). Both perceived burdensomeness (Van Orden et al., 2012a,b) and social exclusion (which may be related to thwarted belongingness; Stillman et al., 2009) predict decreased meaning in life. Given that both IPT variables (i.e., perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness) predict meaning in life as well as suicidal ideation, it may be that meaning in life actually mediates the relationship between the IPT variables and suicidal ideation. Thus, a subsidiary goal of this study is to examine meaning in life as a mediator in the relationship between the IPT variables and suicidal ideation.

1.3. Do presence of and search for meaning both confer resiliency to suicide?

For several reasons, we expect that the presence of meaning in life will be the primary predictor of suicide resilience and that the search for meaning in life will either predict increased suicidal ideation/attempt history or be unrelated to either suicide variable. First, the presence of a meaningful life is simply incompatible with suicide; an individual who perceives his or her life as meaningful would be unlikely to end his or her life. Second, search for meaning in life is often related to negative psychological constructs that are associated with suicide such as perceived lack of personal growth and control over one's environment (Steger et al., 2008), depressive symptoms (Steger et al., 2006; study 1) and rumination (Steger, et al., 2008; study 2). Conversely, presence of meaning in life is associated with psychological well-being and happiness (Steger and Kashdan, 2007). Finally, although search for meaning in life and absence of meaning in life are two distinct facets, individuals who are searching for meaning may fall short of their expectations to find it. Reflection on this absence could generate suicidal ideation.

1.4. The present study

The goal of the present study is to examine the effects of the search for and the presence of meaning in life as suicide resiliency factors. We hypothesize that the presence of, but not the search for, meaning in life will be associated with decreased suicidal ideation and decreased likelihood of a lifetime suicide attempt. We examine this hypothesis using two relevant outcomes: prospective prediction of suicidal ideation over an eight-week period and retrospective prediction of suicide history. We used both

predictors because suicidal ideation and suicide attempts each represent discrete steps on the path to completed suicide. Showing that meaning in life confers resiliency to both steps (or only one) may provide useful information for possible intervention targets. Moreover, past suicidal behavior is the strongest predictor of future suicidal thoughts and behavior and thus eventual suicide (Joiner et al., 2005). To stringently test this hypothesis in a similar manner to previous studies on suicide resiliency (e.g., Kleiman and Liu, 2013), we conducted our analyses controlling for a variety of relevant risk factors for and resiliency factors against suicide.

The first set of covariates includes relevant demographic variables: age (De Leo et al., 2005), race (Mościcki, 1997), and gender (Mościcki, 1994). The second set of covariates includes risk factors for suicide: depression symptoms (Minkoff et al., 1973); anxiety symptoms (Sareen, 2005); and the variables associated with Joiner et al. (2009) theory, perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. The third set of relevant covariates includes other suicide resiliency factors: social support (Kleiman and Liu, 2013) and gratitude (Kleiman et al., 2013b).

In the present study we also test a third, subsidiary hypothesis that meaning in life mediates the relationship between the variables associated with IPT (i.e., perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness) and suicidal ideation. In line with our other hypotheses, we expect presence of, but not search for, meaning in life to mediate the relationship between the IPT variables and suicidal ideation.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

Initially, 670 undergraduate students completed the baseline measures, and 585 of these participants (87.3%) completed the follow-up measures as well. Those who did the baseline only did not significantly differ on any of the study measures from those who did both the baseline and follow-up measures. All descriptive statistics and prospective analyses (hypothesis 1) use the 585 participants in the prospective sample. The cross sectional analysis of lifetime suicide attempt history (hypothesis 2) uses the full sample of 670 because we wanted to maximize the usable data since a suicide attempt is a low base rate event in a college population.

The prospective sample of 585 was approximately 82% female and had an average age of 21.2 years (SD=5.18, range=17–60). Approximately 55% of the sample was Caucasian, 19% was Asian, 11% was African American, and the rest self-identified as another race. Of the 670 participants in the full (i.e., cross-sectional) sample, 39 participants (5.5%) indicated that they had attempted suicide in the past.

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed self-report measures on an online website twice, separated by approximately eight weeks, as part of an IRB-approved study. At baseline, participants completed measures of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, depression and anxiety symptoms, gratitude, social support, meaning in life, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempt history. At follow-up, participants completed a measure of suicidal ideation again. The average time between baseline and follow-up was 60.8 days (SD=8.03). Stringent, IRB-approved suicide risk assessment procedures were utilized to ensure the safety of the participants.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness

The Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (INQ; Van Orden et al., 2008) is a 12-item measure of the variables associated with Joiner's interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide. Seven items assess perceived burdensomeness and five items assess thwarted belongingness. Higher scores for the two scales indicated higher thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Similar versions of this measure demonstrate strong convergent validity with other related measures (Van Orden et al., 2012a,b).