

The role of constructed meaning in adaptation to the onset of life-threatening illness

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Abstract

Do the meanings inherent within a traumatic life event increase our understanding of differential mental health outcomes? In light of this question two central issues are addressed in this article: (1) what variables influence the meaning that is constructed in response to a crisis, and (2) how does this meaning affect the self and ultimately the adaptation/mental health outcome as indicated by the level of emotional distress?

A theoretical model is evaluated via a comparative analysis that incorporates the data of 76 persons with cancer and 130 persons with HIV/AIDS. Three primary findings support this model and the significance of the role of meaning in response to a crisis: (1) the meaning constructed in response to a crisis can be operationalized and its role evaluated as a dimension of the adaptation process, (2) evidence indicates constructed meaning affects self-perception, which subsequently affects adaptation, and (3) the pattern of effects does not differ by illness type since analyses indicate meaning is central to individuals' responses regardless of differences in characteristics of the event.

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Introduction

The onset of life-threatening illness makes an indelible impact on an individual's identity and perception of the future. The effect may be devastating and result in negative change, or its effects may be moderated by coping strategies that facilitate the continuing pursuit of current goals, or it may result in awareness of unrealized potential and re-focusing on the achievement of new possibilities. It has been suggested by several scholars that it is the meaning ascribed to such a life-changing event that determines its significance and shapes individuals' responses (Frankl, 1959; Marris, 1974; Marris & Meltzer, 1978; Turner & Avison, 1992). This is consistent with a fundamental sociological premise

that the individual acts toward an event based on the meaning the event holds for him/her, which arises out of both past and present social processes (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1981). Given this supposition it is plausible that differences in adaptation to life-threatening events, and thus variation in the impact of a particular event on mental health, may be at least partially understood in terms of personal meanings as they are shaped by the social context (Wheaton, 1990; Taylor, 1983). This research specifically explores the role of the meaning individuals construct in determining their response to the onset of life-threatening illness through a comparative study of cancer and HIV disease.

There has been increasing interest in the concept of meaning within the context of stress research. In discussing the effectiveness of research in explaining the variability in outcomes of stressful events, Pearlin (1991) proposes that the same circumstances evoke

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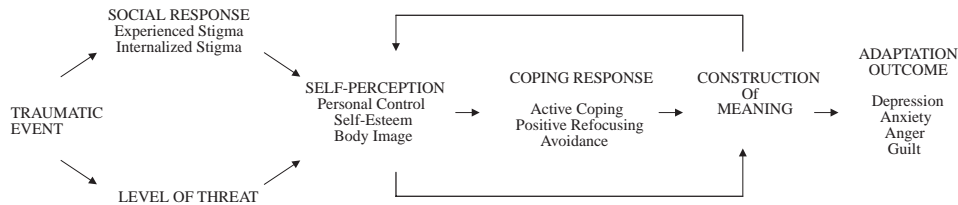


Fig. 1. Role of constructed meaning in response to a traumatic life event.

different degrees of stress depending upon the meanings attached to them. In fact, he maintains that individuals coping with the same type of event may actually be coping with qualitatively different stressors due to differences in the meanings they construct. Likewise, Simon (1997) demonstrates that the meanings individuals attach to role identities are crucial in explaining differential vulnerability to the stress associated with the roles they assume. It is the meaning which individuals construct about life events and the circumstances in which they find themselves that enable them to organize their world and make sense of their lives (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989).

A model is proposed (Fig. 1) in which constructed meaning is a key variable in individuals' responses to traumatic events. Two questions are then addressed based on the model: (1) what factors influence the meaning ascribed to the event? (2) how does this constructed meaning interact with other variables that are significant within the process of adaptation to ultimately affect mental health outcome? Data obtained from persons who have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness are utilized to test the model, and a cross-sectional comparative analysis that includes persons with cancer and those with HIV/AIDS is conducted to increase understanding of the role of each variable within the model in relationship to the construction of meaning, and ultimately to the outcome of adaptation as indicated by the level of emotional distress, and thus mental health.

Background: the concept of meaning in the stress experience

There has been long-standing interest in the literature concerning the significance of "meaning making" or the "search for meaning" by individuals coping with loss and other traumatic events in their lives (Parkes, 1971; Bullman & Wortman, 1977; Moos & Schaefer, 1986; Nolan-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000). Based on this perspective, the focus has been on one's ability or inability to "find meaning," and the impact of this search on adaptation/outcome. Finding meaning is defined as discovering a

purpose in one's loss, or some positive explanation for occurrence of the negative event; it frequently includes finding an answer to the question, "why me?" These explanations must then be consistent with one's view of the nature of the world and the self if they are to be effective in the resolution of loss. A study by Davis, Lehman, and Wortman (1999) found many individuals failed to come up with an acceptable meaning for the traumatic event, and those who appeared to be coping most effectively had never pursued a search for meaning. Based on those findings and similar inconsistent findings of others Davis et al. (2000) suggest that widely held beliefs about the search for meaning and its usefulness in facilitating positive resolution and adaptation deserve re-thinking. They also state that the concept has been vague and imprecise, and its relationship to other important variables in the process of adaptation has not been clarified.

A basic assumption of this study is that *there is no question as to whether individuals find meaning in the circumstances associated with a traumatic event, for at the least it is inherent in the event itself and implicit within the individual's response* (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1981). The meaning attached to the event refers to individuals' unique perceptions of the world as they know it and the ways in which they perceive the event redefining their world, their place in that world, and therefore their personal identity (Fife, 1994). In other words, meaning is a key factor in the individual's efforts to adjust to the event. This is a particularly important issue when considering the role of meaning in response to traumatic events, for given this conceptualization it would be expected to affect behavior and subsequent outcomes.

Marris (1974, 1982) suggests there are "structures of meaning" that are cumulative phenomena learned within the context of social relationships and particular circumstances. He argues meaning is integrally linked to identity, providing the basis of continuity between past and present, and it is within this framework that the consequences of events are interpreted. It is then understandable that meaning as a fundamental dimension of human life, would assume a primary role in the individual's response to a traumatic event that represents a major life transition. As Pearlin (1991) contends,

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