

1 From Shattered Goals to Meaning in Life: Life Crafting in Times of the 2 COVID-19 Pandemic

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13 Abstract

14 The novel COVID-19 pandemic has created an extraordinary situation for our generation, with many
15 countries being on lockdown. With this new situation comes many psychological challenges, not
16 only for health care workers and people suffering from COVID-19, but also for the general
17 population. Adapting to the new situation can be demanding. Experts have suggested that emotions
18 during this situation are very similar to grief, and people experience emptiness and sadness about the
19 loss of their normal lives, which can even lead to a loss of meaning in life. In this paper, we argue
20 that life crafting could offer a way to help people cope with the situation and renew their sense of
21 meaning. A life crafting intervention is based on theoretical insights from multiple areas of research,
22 like positive psychology, expressive writing, and the salutogenesis framework. Life-crafting
23 interventions help people find meaning in life by focusing on their ideal future, and helping them set
24 goals, make concrete plans to achieve those goals and overcome obstacles. Since having a clear
25 purpose or meaning in life has been shown to have many benefits, we propose that it can also help
26 people to cope with the psychological effects of the pandemic. A life-crafting intervention can offer
27 people a chance to evaluate their goals in a time of uncertainty and rediscover meaning in life to
28 guide them through these difficult times.

29 1 Introduction

30 The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a unique situation in the world. There are many different
31 measures being taken to contain the virus. Most countries around the world have implemented a
32 ‘lockdown’ in some form, and although some countries have stricter regulations than others, most of
33 them involve at least some type of so-called ‘social distancing’ (Hale et al., 2020). In a short period
34 of time, the normal life that people were used to living has been drastically and unexpectedly
35 changed. This has consequences for people’s mental and physical well-being (for a review, see
36 Schippers & Kompanje, 2020).

37

38 Grief experts have suggested that emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic are very similar to grief,
39 as in the case of losing a loved one (Berinato, 2020). David Kessler described the current situation as
40 follows: “Our world as we knew it has died, and we are feeling the sadness” (Amanpour&Co, 2020;
41 Berinato, 2020). In accordance with these statements, scientific research has also shown that grief is
42 not only experienced after a bereavement but can also play a role after other life changing losses,
43 such as a divorce or job loss (Papa, Lancaster, & Kahler, 2014). Although these forms of grief are
44 rather individual, more collective forms of grief that are not necessarily related to direct individual
45 experiences of bereavement can also occur, for example in refugees when they need to adjust to a
46 host country (Baskauskas, 1981).

47 There are several ways grief might play a role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless to say,
48 people who are directly affected by the virus or have loved ones who have suffered from or even
49 passed away because of the virus experience grief. However, these grief processes are not the focus
50 of this paper. Rather, this paper is directed at the collective grief processes that might be present in
51 the general population, as a result of a loss of normalcy, caused partly by the many containment
52 measures. This loss of normalcy and the grief over what is no longer possible can lead to a sense of
53 emptiness, and even a loss of meaning in life (Berinato, 2020; Taha, 2020). Some researchers have
54 even suggested that isolation measures that take more than 10 days may lead to post traumatic stress
55 syndrome (Schippers & Kompanje, 2020). In accordance with this, different theories have shown that
56 finding meaning is an important element for recovery in a grief process, and have suggested that it
57 can help in finding post-traumatic growth instead of post-traumatic stress (Hogan & Schmidt, 2002;
58 Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Kessler, 2019; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). As the mental health
59 effects can be quite severe (Fegert, Vitiello, Plener, & Clemens, 2020; Schippers & Kompanje,
60 2020), restoring a sense of meaning in life can be an essential part of the healing process (e.g., Hogan
61 & Schmidt, 2002; Updegraff et al., 2008). However, research also suggests that people might need
62 guidance to find meaning in a structured manner (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008).
63 Therefore, in this perspective paper, we argue that a life crafting intervention, which is aimed at
64 finding meaning in life, could be helpful to guide people through this grief-like process.

65 **2 Grief and finding meaning**

66 Finding meaning seems to be a central theme in the grief and trauma literature. However, the term
67 ‘meaning’ has been defined and operationalized differently across different fields of study. In their
68 review, Martela and Steger (2016) distinguish between three main types of meaning in life:
69 coherence, purpose and significance. Coherence refers to “a sense of comprehensibility and one’s life
70 making sense”. Purpose means having “a sense of core goals, aims, and direction in life”, and
71 significance refers to “a sense of life’s inherent value and having a life worth living” (pp. 531).

72 In the literature about grief and trauma, finding meaning often refers to the first type of meaning,
73 coherence, conceptualized as making sense of what has happened. One well-known theory in the
74 literature on grief and trauma is the theory of shattered assumptions, developed by Janoff-Bulman
75 (1992). According to this theory, there are three fundamental human assumptions about the self and
76 the world that form a person’s assumptive world, and that guide our day-to-day thoughts and
77 behaviors. These assumptions are that the world is benevolent and meaningful, and that the self is
78 worthy. A traumatic event can shatter these fundamental assumptions. To recover, assumptions
79 should be rebuilt. One way to do this is to find meaning in the traumatic event, or, in other words, a
80 way to make sense of it. Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) showed that the greater the ability
81 of a bereaved individual to find meaning, defined as making sense of the loss, the less intense their
82 grief. Although this theory is usually referred to in studies about individual grief or trauma, research

83 by Updegraff et al. (2008) showed that finding meaning is also of importance after a collective
84 trauma, in this case the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They found that in the general population (i.e., the
85 majority of their sample consisted of people who were not directly exposed to the attacks), finding
86 meaning, again defined as making sense of what happened, in the early aftermath of the event was
87 related to lower post-traumatic stress symptoms in the two years following. This effect was mediated
88 by reduced fears of future terrorism, which the authors saw as a sign that finding meaning led to
89 rebuilding of assumptions about security and invulnerability. This definition of meaning thus refers
90 to finding meaning in the events that have occurred and rebuilding assumptions of a meaningful and
91 coherent world.

92 Another kind of meaning that seems important in the grief process is the meaning in one's own life,
93 which corresponds more with meaning in the sense of purpose and significance, as defined by
94 Martela and Steger (2016). Besides making sense of the event itself and rebuilding assumptions
95 about the world, rebuilding the assumptive world seems to entail more. Janoff-Bulman (2006) also
96 suggested that rumination about questions regarding the meaning of life itself may later shift to
97 rumination about finding meaning in one's own life. In general, having a clear sense of purpose in
98 life has been shown to have many benefits for mental as well as physical well-being (for a review,
99 see Schippers and Ziegler, 2019). In the context of trauma, Sawyer and Brewster (2019) also showed
100 that meaning in life was positively related to post-traumatic growth after bereavement. In the specific
101 context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trzebiński, Cabański, and Czarnecka (2020) have shown that a
102 higher level of meaning in life (i.e., having a clear purpose and meaning in life, having life goals, not
103 being afraid of the future; comparable to what Martela and Steger define as 'purpose') was related to
104 lower anxiety and emotional distress during the crisis. Therefore, the authors argue that meaning in
105 life (i.e., purpose), among other factors, may work as a buffer against stress reactions to the
106 pandemic. Notably, whereas they assessed meaning in life as a stable factor, the authors argue that in
107 the face of a prolonged crisis, meaning in life may be affected as well.

108 In the present paper, we predominantly focus on the second and third type of meaning as
109 distinguished by Martela and Steger (2016): purpose and significance. In line with the reasoning of
110 Trzebiński et al. (2020), we expect that the sense of purpose and in severe cases even significance in
111 life for many people in the general population might have already been affected during the pandemic.
112 The UN agency has estimated that in the second quarter of 2020, 305 million jobs have already been
113 lost worldwide, mainly caused by prolonged containment measures (Straus, 2020). Furthermore, the
114 IMF has predicted a severe worldwide economic crisis (International Monetary Fund, 2020). In
115 addition, as described earlier, grief-like emotions over the loss of normalcy can also lead to a loss of
116 purpose in life. In accordance with this, one study has shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic,
117 the sense of purpose in life of students in higher education decreased in the second half of the
118 academic year, whereas in the cohort of students from the year before, it remained stable (Schippers
119 et al., in preparation).

120 We expect that there are individual differences in the degree to which purpose and significance are
121 affected by the pandemic and the containment measures. For some people, life may have remained
122 relatively normal, and their purpose in life may have stayed intact. However, because of the
123 containment measures, some of their underlying goals might have been compromised. For example,
124 someone's purpose in life might be to become a psychologist, but because of the containment
125 measures they cannot do their internship as planned (i.e., cannot attain this intermediary goal), and
126 they need to find new ways and set new goals to reach their purpose. For others, who have for
127 example lost their job or even their company (i.e., their life's work) during the pandemic, their
128 purpose or even significance in life itself might also be harmed. Consequently, the individual might

129 experience a loss of directionality in their life as “goal are signals that orient a person to what is
130 valuable, meaningful and purposeful” (Emmons, 2003, p. 107) and can be seen as a key element in
131 human functioning (Emmons, 2003; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Some might even lose their sense of
132 significance in life. Purpose and significance in life are often entangled. Significance is partly
133 dependent on purpose, but also on other factors such as relationships with friends or family (Martela
134 & Steger, 2016). However, since the containment measures mainly comprise of social distancing, this
135 may make it more difficult to maintain social connections and support, which potentially makes the
136 threat to the sense of significance even larger. Since many studies have shown that having purpose in
137 life is essential to well-being and health (e.g., Hill & Turiano, 2014, Kim et al., 2014; for a review,
138 see Schippers & Ziegler, 2019), we argue that it should be rebuilt. We propose that a life-crafting
139 intervention could help people in rebuilding their sense of purpose and significance in life.

140 **3 What is life crafting and how can it help to find meaning?**

141 Individuals searching for meaning are often unlikely to do so in an organized manner and might be
142 more focused on the past and present than particularly concerned about the future (Steger et al.,
143 2008). Relatedly, while the presence of meaning in life is associated with positive outcomes, the
144 actual (prolonged) search for meaning is associated with greater negative outcomes, and such a
145 search could be indicative of meaninglessness (Linley & Joseph, 2011; Updegraff et al., 2008).

146 A more structured approach to finding meaning and purpose in life, called “life crafting”, was
147 recently proposed by Schippers & Ziegler (2019). They defined the term life crafting as “a process in
148 which people actively reflect on their present and future life, set goals for important areas of life—
149 social, career, and leisure time—and, if required, make concrete plans and undertake actions to
150 change these areas in a way that is more congruent with their values and wishes. (p. 3)”.
151 Subsequently, the authors discuss an expressive-writing intervention to aid individuals in finding a
152 purpose in life, while at the same time ensuring that they make concrete plans to work toward this
153 purpose. This type of expressive writing exercises has shown to have benefits for (mental) health as
154 well as academic performance (e.g., Lepore & Smith, 2002; Schippers et al., 2020, Schippers,
155 Scheepers, & Peterson, 2015), and has roots in the fields of positive psychology and salutogenesis
156 (Antonovsky, 1996). A central part of the life crafting intervention described by Schippers and
157 Ziegler (2019) is based on the Japanese concept of ‘ikigai’; which can be defined as a sense of “a life
158 worth living” (Sone et al., 2008, pp. 709). The term ikigai directly relates to the significance of one’s
159 life, which has been defined as the third facet of meaning in live, next to purpose and coherence
160 (Martela & Steger, 2016). As the authors describe, significance “is about evaluating one’s life as a
161 whole, including past, present, and the future, while the other [purpose] is distinctively future-
162 oriented: it is about evaluating the potential future value of one’s life through sustained goals that
163 give life direction and momentum”(pp.537). As such, the life-crafting intervention proposed by
164 Schippers & Ziegler (2019) does not only strive to provide a framework which can help the
165 individual in structuring their search for a (renewed) purpose in life but also lets the individual
166 reintegrate this new purpose into their life as a whole (significance).

167 **3.1 How can life crafting help to find meaning during the COVID-19 crisis?**

168 Important elements of a life-crafting intervention are: (1) discovering values and passions, (2)
169 reflecting on one’s ideal future, (3) writing about specific goal attainment and “if-then” plans, and (4)
170 making public commitments to the goals set (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019; see also Table 1). In
171 general, people often have difficulty with finding meaning in life, and therefore, a life-crafting
172 intervention could be beneficial to many people. As it seems that the timing of interventions is

173 crucial (Wilson, 2011), this may be particularly useful when people experience a loss of meaning.
174 For the current pandemic situation, we propose several adjustments to the original intervention. First,
175 it should be assessed what exactly has been shattered for the individual. Is it just their goals, or also
176 their purpose in life or even their sense of significance in life? Second, based on this assessment, a
177 custom intervention could be presented to the individual. For individuals with compromised goals
178 only, but purpose intact, an emphasis could be placed on part 3 (see Table 1) of the intervention. For
179 example, someone's purpose in life may be to become an Olympic champion in athletics. During the
180 crisis, (s)he might not be able to pursue the intermediary goal to train three times a week at a running
181 track. Though the purpose remains intact, the athlete should formulate new intermediate goals, for
182 example through an adapted scheme that focuses on an alternative and achievable training routine,
183 which still allows the pursuit of the original purpose in a different way. For individuals with a
184 compromised purpose in life, both part 2 and 3 would be important. For example, someone's purpose
185 in life may have been to build up a business and (s)he has just opened three restaurants. However,
186 due to the pandemic and the restrictive measures, nobody can visit the restaurants, and therefore, the
187 person loses the company. This person would need to think about a new purpose in life during and
188 after the crisis, for it might take a while before the economy is fully restored, and opening new
189 restaurants may be unrealistic in the near future. This person may have been very passionate about
190 the hospitality business, and since purpose and significance in life are often intertwined, the sense of
191 significance in life may also be compromised for this person. In such a case, it would be beneficial to
192 take the full intervention, to discover new values and passions that lie within, and be able to find a
193 new pathway to significance in life. This allows the person to discover other values and passions that
194 exist besides the one that the person was focused on, and may help to find other directions in life that
195 are also found worthy of pursuing.

196 **[Insert Table 1 here]**

197 **4 Discussion**

198 In this perspective paper we argued that a life crafting intervention can be beneficial to rebuild
199 meaning in life after it has been shattered by grief-like emotions over the loss of normalcy during the
200 COVID-19 pandemic. A customized intervention is proposed, based on the degree to which the sense
201 of meaning has been affected.

202 An obvious advantage of the life-crafting intervention is that it is easily scalable. The expressive
203 writing exercises can be done online, individually. This might be especially important during the
204 COVID-19 pandemic, where many people struggle with psychological issues (e.g., Holmes et al.,
205 2020), whereas demands on mental health care have increased, and are expected to maintain on a
206 high level for the coming time. Some psychologists have argued that psychological help for the
207 general population during this crisis has been largely overlooked (van Hoof, 2020). Schippers and
208 Kompanje (2020) have reviewed the combination of effects and ripple effects that the crisis and the
209 measures that have been taken has in terms of economic, social, mental and physical health, and
210 present a model of the interrelated effects. They also point to the fact that interventions are needed in
211 order to counteract some of these effects. Fegert et al. (2020) expect that many young people will
212 experience psychological problems not only during but also in the aftermath of the pandemic, and
213 predict that the return to normality may take a long time.

214 The degree to which people suffer from psychological problems during the pandemic differs per
215 individual and also depends on pre-existing psychological problems and vulnerabilities (e.g., Fegert
216 et al., 2020). Therefore, there is even more need for customized, scalable interventions (see also

217 Schippers & Kompanje, 2020). The large majority of the general population would likely not need
218 extensive psychological care but could still benefit from interventions to rebuild their sense of
219 meaning in life. For the more severe cases, more extensive psychological care would be needed. In a
220 recent paper, it has been proposed that life-crafting can also be delivered using Artificial Intelligence,
221 through a chatbot (Dekker et al., 2020). By using a chatbot, the intervention can be tailored to the
222 individual's needs, and can also be extended with other online psychological interventions aimed at
223 improving mental health, such as cognitive behavioral therapy. We expect that such online tailored
224 interventions would be sufficient for the large majority of the general population and could also be of
225 (temporary) help for individuals with more severe problems, awaiting further professional
226 psychological care.

227 To conclude, we propose that a life crafting intervention can help individuals to rediscover meaning
228 in life, defined as a sense of purpose and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016), after this has been
229 shattered in a grief-like situation. We expect that a renewed sense of meaning can help people cope
230 with this collective trauma, and hopefully resolve their grief over the loss of normalcy.

231

232

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Table 1 Elements and description of a life-crafting intervention

Part	Elements	Tasks involved
1. Discovering values and passion	Values and passion	Writing about: (1) What they like to do, (2) what kind of relationships they would like to have, both in their private life and their work life, (3) what kind of career they would like to have, and (4) lifestyle choices
	Current and desired competencies and habits	(1) Qualities they admire in others, (2) competencies they have or would like to acquire, and (3) their own habits they like or dislike
2. Reflecting on one’s ideal future	Present and future social life	(1) Relationships that energize and de-energize them, (2) kinds of friends and acquaintances they would like to have in the future, and (4) what their ideal family life and broader social life would look like
	Possible future career (path)	(1) What is important in a job, (2) what is it they like to do, (3), what kind of colleagues do they want, and (4) whom do they want to meet through their work?
	Ideal versus less ideal future	Best possible self and future when there are no (self-

		imposed) constraints. Contrast this with future if no changes are made
3. Writing about specific goal attainment and “if-then” plans	Goal attainment and “if-then” plans	(1) Formulating, strategizing, and prioritizing goals, (2) identifying and describing ways to overcome obstacles, and (3) monitoring progress towards goals
4. Making public commitment to the goals set	Public commitment to goal	Photo with statement, which communicates their goals to the world; communicating goals to friends, coworkers

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