



“MEANING MAKING” TO MOVE FORWARD

Dr. Alice Schrub
Staff Psychologist, Headington Institute

To say that we, as individuals and a global community, have been changed by the last several years would be a woeful understatement in light of all we’ve encountered. Even now, we continue to navigate the impacts of a global pandemic, civil unrest, racial inequality, and economic instability. Ongoing change has shaken how many of us view our goals, our values, our beliefs, and our worldview. When our views no longer match our lived experiences, we may feel angry, stuck, and confused. Our distress level goes up when we struggle to make sense of our lives. While this distress is normal, if left unaddressed it can lead to worsening mental health.

One method for reducing our distress and making sense of our lives is a process called “meaning making.” This is the active process of redefining how we view our experiences to better align with our beliefs, goals, and values. Or, redefining our values and goals to incorporate our new experiences. This doesn’t mean taking a negative situation and making it positive. It means that we all are allowed to change how we view things. This helps us cope with and create space for understanding the atrocities we’ve experienced while grieving the reality of these changes, and to adjust our past perceptions to our present circumstances as we shift our attention towards a healthier perspective.

Through redefining our perspective, we are able to make decisions based on where we are at and what we need in the present. We are able to refocus our energy on goals that feel purposeful and values that give us a sense of direction. This in turn fosters a greater sense of inherent significance and life satisfaction as we are choosing to step into life and empowering ourselves.

Three key components to making meaning:

1. Develop a narrative that make sense to you. As you process the past several years, you may need to write and rewrite your story. The goal of meaning making is to move in a direction of health and wellness, one filled with more grace and more self-compassion. Consider journaling to help gain perspective or creating art to express your emotions.
2. Purpose is something you pursue. Choosing activities that align with your goals and values helps foster a sense of direction and meaning in life. Pick one to two activities a day that support your goals and values (e.g., calling a friend, going for a walk, connecting with your faith). Then, give yourself credit for all you’ve done!
3. Foster a connection to things you find hopeful, significant, and remind you of a life worth living. It is natural to experience distress when the things that used to give us hope no longer do. It may be helpful to keep a list of things that you are grateful for or give you hope (e.g., children playing at the park, the changing of the seasons, your family).

The most important thing to know about making meaning is that it is an ongoing process. Be gentle with yourself.





