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Meaning making in the aftermath of trauma: A narrative review

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Abstract

Meaning making is an important task for overcoming the impact of physical and psychological traumas, yet various theoretical perspectives conceptualise this process differently. Although meaning making is central to various psychological therapies aimed at addressing the impact of trauma, there remain some differences in definition, stance and approach. This narrative review on meaning making in the aftermath of trauma is therefore informed by seminal texts of existential therapy with searches conducted using databases relevant to the field using key word combinations like “meaning making”, “process of meaning making” and “meaning-making process” with “trauma”. This search generated over 200 published works that were reviewed for their relevance by assigning low, medium, high, or very high ratings. Within this review different understandings and conceptualisations of meaning and trauma have been conceptualised and discussed. How these are interrelated and the role of posttraumatic growth to the recovery of trauma is also deliberated. The discourse develops into the role of meaning in various modalities to demonstrate the importance of this within talking therapies. Concerns surrounding meaning making within talking therapies are also considered.

Keywords: Narrative Review; Meaning Making; Trauma; Talking Therapies.

1 Introduction

Meaning making is considered an important task for overcoming the impact of physical and psychological traumas [1], yet different theoretical perspectives conceptualise this process differently. Although meaning making is central to various psychological therapies aimed at addressing the impact of trauma, there remain some differences in definition, stance, and approach.

What is understood by meaning depends on the discipline and epistemological stance that one takes as the conceptualisation of meaning has been undertaken by many different fields of studies, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, or linguistics. For instance, meaning has been defined as “a relationship between two sorts of things: signs and the kinds of things they intend, express, or signify” (para, 2) [2]. According to the author, humans are “meaning-makers”: we make meaning of our experiences “by placing them within a context and anticipating how present actions move them toward a set of goals” therefore emphasises that human beings make and seek meaning and that it is constructed within a context (past, present, or future). Hence, if we want to understand a person’s meaning, we need to consider their individual context.

Whether we intend to or not, and whether we are conscious of this or not, we ascribe meanings to ourselves, others, the world, and experiences. A central role to meaning within human existence is that “People understand and navigate their lives through their systems of meaning. These meaning systems inform how people understand themselves, their lives, and the larger world” (p. 15) [3].

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The following narrative review summarises relevant theoretical perspectives pertaining to the meaning making process following trauma. It aims to provide an overview of psychological conceptualisations of and approaches to supporting meaning making following trauma to provide insights for practitioners and researchers in the field.

2 Material and methods

Literature was sought and identified through searching relevant databases (PsycInfo, APA PsyArticles, APA PsyBooks and the British Library) using variations of the key words “meaning making”, “process of meaning making”, “meaning-making process” and “trauma”. The search generated 230 results, of which 20 were included in the review following an initial screening of each publication for relevance.

Results are presented narratively, summarised by key definitions, processes and approaches to psychological therapies.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Types of meaning

The conceptualisation of meaning depends on the discipline in which the concept is applied and the stance we take. A conceptualisation of meaning making originally developed by Park and Folkman [4] is presented, in which the authors distinguish between global and situational meaning. Park has elaborated and integrated this model in her more recent writings as well in collaboration with other authors. In *Trauma, meaning and spirituality*, Park et al., introduce the reader to their conceptualisation of meaning by referring to so called “meaning systems”. According to the authors, “people understand and navigate their lives through their systems of meaning” [4]. These systems, which encompass both beliefs, purposes, goals, and values, inform how people understand themselves, their lives, and their world [4]. These meaning systems not only influence how we make sense of our world in general but also of specific situations in our lives. They, accordingly, distinguish between global meaning and situational meaning and portray through their “reciprocal meaning making model” (p. 16) how the experience of trauma might influence these meaning systems and even change them.

Park et al., [4] (pp.20-30) elaborate on three essential elements of global meaning: global beliefs, global goals, and sense of meaning and purpose. The authors state that while social-cognitive theories provide us with the understanding that global beliefs are influenced by our personal experience, to date we do not actually know how these beliefs are created or develop. They point out, however, how in addition to personal experience, personality and cognitive capacities may have an impact on the formation of global beliefs. Global beliefs entail “broad assumptions about the self, others, and the larger world” (p. 20) while global goals refer to people’s global motivation in life, “one’s desired long-term processes, events, or outcomes” (p. 29). Park et al. state that their third element, “the experience of a sense of meaning and purpose or as being connected to something greater than oneself” (p. 30), was the emotional aspect of global meaning. This is where the authors introduce spirituality in their model, which plays an important role in their understanding of the interplay of trauma and meaning. With situational meaning, they refer to “how global meaning, in the context of a particular situation, influences one’s reaction to that situation” (p. 31). According to these authors, this comprises the meaning a person appraises to a situation as well as detecting a discrepancy between global meaning and the appraised situational meaning, meaning making processes and the meaning that is made from the situation. It shall be noted that Park et al. [4] provide one conceptualisation of meaning. Their understanding was deemed relevant for this narrative review due to their interest in trauma and how meaning, trauma and spirituality are interwoven. Furthermore, the authors do not appear to limit themselves to one theory or stance, yet even though they do not explicitly say so, look to approach trauma from a holistic stance taking into consideration individual, social, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual factors.

3.2 Meaning and trauma

The word “trauma” in psychology is used twofold: it can either describe experiences that were extremely distressing or life-threatening for individuals, such as natural disasters, war, rape or physical and/or sexual abuse, or refer to the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or spiritual effects that the above-mentioned events can have on a person [5]. Our understanding and perception of trauma is constantly evolving. Whereas within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) [6], it is believed to be an extreme event that affected only few within the population, today we know that trauma is part of the human experience and that the majority of people within the population experience at least one traumatic event in the span of their lifetime [7].

One common way to conceptualise psychological trauma is from a medical perspective, such as through the DSM [6]. The DSM organises human functioning into categories such as normal or abnormal and claims that disordered functioning can be determined by objective criteria [5]. The same applies to the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is the currently used conceptualisation of trauma within the DSM and determines eight diagnostic categories for the disorder. This medicalisation of the human experience has been criticised for being reductionist as it reduces complex phenomena of the human existence to medical terms of syndromes and symptoms [8].

From a humanistic-existential approach, trauma is viewed differently. For example, it has been viewed previously as a “normal response” to “a threatening existential experience” [9]. The authors offer a conceptualisation of PTSD that goes beyond assessing and treating symptoms - as it might be the case in pathology-focused therapy approaches - and that considers the lived experience of individuals and its existential meaning. This conceptualisation of trauma was adopted within this narrative review as it recognises both the visible and invisible parts of trauma, emphasises subjective experiences and moves away from a pathologising of the lived experiences of human beings.

3.3 Shattering of meaning through trauma

In line with the humanistic-existential understanding of trauma, researchers [10] have found a way of grasping the potential impact of trauma on one’s existence: What happens when we are traumatised? In addition to the physical, neurological and emotional trauma, we experience a fundamental assault on our right to live, on our personal sense of worth, and further, on our sense of the world (including people). Our relationship with existence itself is shattered. Existence in this sense includes all the meaning structures that tell us we are a valued and viable part of the fabric of life [9].

Other authors [4, 11-13] have equally evoked the shattering of assumptions, meaning or existence that can take place through trauma. For instance, one researcher [11] who advocates for a holistic understanding of trauma through an existential-phenomenological perspective, states that this “existential shattering arguably plunges the individual into a situation of crisis where human existence is stripped to its ultimate givens thereby permeating the experience of trauma with themes of meaninglessness, isolation, freedom and death” (p. 171). Moreover, Stolorow’s [13] deeply personal account of his experience of losing his wife and his thoughts around emotional trauma and existence equally depict this understanding of trauma as a shattering effect on one’s life and the potential impact it can have on one’s sense of being. Others [12] have pointed out in this regard how subjective the perception of potentially traumatic events is: what might shatter one person to the core might not affect someone else. For the author, a traumatic event can be defined as “one that shatters a victim’s fundamental assumptions” (para. 3).

It is emphasised here how these authors, in one way or another, connect trauma to meaning and argue how trauma has the potential to shatter meaning and accord this aspect of the subjective experience a central role in their approach to conceptualising trauma.

3.4 Post-traumatic growth and meaning making

A concept commonly associated with recovery after trauma is Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). The theory of PTG was first introduced by Tedeschi and Calhoun [14]. It “encompasses the psychological improvements and strengths a person develops following times of extreme stress or trauma” (p.2) [1]. While applying a mostly cognitive framework to explain the experiences around PTG, Tedeschi and Calhoun [14] make use of both philosophical, religious, and psychological works, their clinical experiences with clients as well as previous research and introduce the reader, inter alia, to their understanding of how growth takes place. Following their writings, many authors have explored and researched this concept. Within trauma therapy, PTG appears to be a generally accepted and integrated conception. It is usually agreed that the process of meaning making plays a major role for attaining PTG [1, 15-16].

Since then, different studies and writings have explored PTG and its potential mental and physical benefits for people affected by trauma. For example, it has been reported that PTG positively impacts perceived changes in personal strength, leads to increase of meaningful interpersonal relationships, improves appreciation for life, changes priorities and enriches spiritual life [17-20]. Furthermore, self-report scales have been developed to evaluate whether and to what extent someone has attained PTG, such as the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory [14] which provides an example of how the concept can serve clinical practice. However, the experience of trauma does not automatically lead to posttraumatic growth and expecting clients to make meaning from trauma or even pressuring them to make meaning can have detrimental effects.

3.5 Meaning making, trauma and free will

In a recent article on trauma and free will [21], the authors critically evaluate the existentialist stance on people's freedom to create meaning in the light of recent traumatological research and draw the reader's attention to the possibility of unintentionally disempowering clients "by recreating traumatic narratives around themes of power, control, and responsibility" (p. 38). The authors also provide a brief overview of existing positions on people's capacity to find or create meaning despite their circumstances, such as Frankl, May, Sartre, de Beauvoir and Yalom and offer a "feminist, multicultural and social justice critique of the existentialist response to trauma" (p. 38) from a trauma-informed perspective. Through presenting existing empirical research on the topic, which the authors themselves call "conflicting" (p. 42), Smith and Lapsansky [21] state that certain types of traumatic experiences, such as moral injuries, trauma of coercion/betrayal, historical-cultural traumas, and complex/compound traumas impact the presence and search for meaning in survivors of these specific traumas. Following their argumentation for this statement, the authors provide practical recommendations for existential counsellors and advice against pressuring clients into a positive or adaptive meaning making and to accept different or opposing ways of creating meaning. Overall, the article provides an intriguing position on current understandings of questions around free will and meaning making in the aftermath of trauma, which directs the reader to possible limitations of a purely existentialist approach within trauma-care and invites to embrace a paradoxical position with regards to meaning making and trauma.

3.6 Meaning and talking therapies

Even though the concept of meaning holds a particular role within the existential-phenomenological approach, meaning is explored and worked with in many different therapeutic modalities. This section intends to provide a brief understanding of how meaning is looked at and conceptualised within different psychotherapeutic schools, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), psychodynamic approaches, person-centred therapy, and existential-phenomenological therapy.

Modern CBT is based on several principles and meaning is especially considered through the cognitive principle within this approach, which emphasises the interpretation of events as opposed to their nature [22]. Within CBT, behaviour is understood as being influenced by thoughts and feelings (behavioural principle), for example, the meanings that we accord to an event impact how we might react. Through Ehlers' and Clark' [23] cognitive model for persistent PTSD for example, it becomes evident how central meanings and interpretations are to the approach: the person's beliefs, cognitive processing during and after the trauma and negative appraisals of the trauma may lead to the person experiencing the trauma as a current threat and therefore suffering from persistent PTSD. Within a CBT-informed approach, these aspects are explored, identified, and re-assessed in order to reduce the presence of PTSD related symptoms.

Within psychodynamic therapy approaches, meaning is considered and looked at rather differently. Guntrip, [24] for example, who introduces the reader to the overall-theoretical position of the approach, refers to meaning and its relevance to the modality on several occasions. According to him "psychodynamics is defined as the study of the motivated and meaningful life of human beings" (para.19). Who, furthermore, elaborates the importance of the meaning of a person's life history within the approach. Past experiences and relationships play a central role within psychodynamic therapies as they are understood to shape a person's understanding of themselves and others. Cabaniss [25] then draws our attention to unconscious meanings; both within the client, which can then be explored through therapy, as well as the meanings of a client's behaviour, for example, in their day-to-day and in the therapy room. Both authors emphasise the importance of a meaningful, or worthwhile existence [24-25], which is understood in relation to the self and the world.

Person-centred therapy treats meaning in a very different way. Emphasis is placed on idiosyncratic meaning, and it is the role of the therapist to empathically understand their clients' meanings. According to Wilkins [26], "all experiences, behavior, affect and ideation have meaning" (section 90). Therapy, such as through the therapist's communication with the client, can lead to bringing implicit meaning to the client's awareness. Self-structure plays a central role both within the approach and the process of meaning making. Tolan and Cameron [27], for example, argue that it is only through our self-structure that we construct our experiences and make meaning of them.

Exploring the role of meaning in other therapeutic modalities illustrates the central role the concept holds within existential-phenomenological psychotherapy. To illustrate, Yalom [28] considers meaninglessness as one of the four existential crises (amongst death, freedom and isolation), which may cause psychological distress and anxiety. Many of the existential philosophers and practitioners, such as Heidegger, Frankl, or Spinelli, have explored meaning and its role within human existence. For instance, Heidegger [29] was concerned with discovering the "meaning of being" and offers a philosophical consideration of the concept. His central philosophical concern evolved around the why of being, for

which, however, he never found an answer. For Heidegger, we are beings in relationship (“Dasein”) and our existence is not separate from the world. He suggests that we are unable to choose our ontological conditions, but that we can choose how to respond to them (freedom of choice). Unlike Husserl, Heidegger believed that the object and the subject could not be separated, he suggested that we cannot observe human existence from an outside perspective because experiences are always situated in the world.

Whereas Frankl [30], an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, whose name and works are habitually associated with the concept of meaning, believed that finding meaning was our main purpose in life. In his book [30], where he describes the every-day-life of his and his comrades’ imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, Frankl shared his own understanding of the psychology of the prisoners and the vital role upholding meaning in life played to the survival of these extreme adversities. Frankl developed the notion, which is also reflected in his logotherapy (a psychotherapy approach developed by Frankl), that humans could find meaning in any kind of circumstances. He furthermore believed that humans were free to find meaning in what they did and were free to choose how they experienced a situation even when faced with inevitable suffering. Hence, psychological distress could be overcome through identifying the meaning of the situation.

Furthermore, Spinelli [31] points out that numerous existential authors, especially those who were influenced by Frankl, have emphasised the importance of meaning. He highlights, however, that the issue of meaninglessness was equally important, and that existential phenomenology allowed us to not see meaning and meaninglessness as two separate entities. Spinelli [31] argues that “instead, it [existential phenomenology] can consider both as extremes within the context of an inseparable, co-existent polarity wherein each extreme is of equal standing and import” (para. 3).

Finally, existential therapists recognise the importance of discovering meaning and that lack of meaning may be a source of distress or the reason why people seek therapy [28, 32-33]. Indeed, according to some, [32-33] what is meant by meaning is both the meaning of situations and experiences as well as the general meaning of life and that through therapy, these meanings can be explored and discovered.

Abbreviations

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
DSM – Diagnostic Statistical Manual
PTG – Post-Traumatic Growth
PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

4 Conclusion

This narrative review has demonstrated the role of meaning within human experiences and existence as well as within different therapeutic modalities. It furthermore exhibited how the experience of psychological trauma can shatter one’s meaning and portrayed the role meaning plays with regards to PTG, a concept closely linked to the experience of moving beyond one’s trauma. However, client accounts of meaning making processes within therapy that could guide professionals in their work with trauma clients appear to have received negligible attention in the existing literature. Therefore, future research is urged to address this shortage of material by considering issues surrounding how clients make meaning after trauma through talking therapy and what might be helpful and unhelpful in this process.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Authors' contribution

Conceptualisation: FK. Data curation: FK. Methodology: FK. Supervision: JL & AP. Validation: All authors. Writing – original draft: FK. Writing – review & editing: All authors.

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