

Values

Intervention

n/a

Client

Yes

Meaningful Photography

Meaning in life has been argued to be a critical component of human well-being (e.g., Ryff, 1989). Accordingly, research has revealed links between meaning in life and better functioning in nearly every domain of life (for review, see Steger, 2009, 2012). Given the beneficial consequences of experienced meaning in life, how to cultivate meaning becomes an important question.

Steger and colleagues (2014) tested an elegant way to enhance meaning using a method called auto-photography, which is a visual research method that aims to “see the world through someone else’s eyes” (Thomas, 2009, p. 244). This method allows participants to illustrate their perspectives clearly. Participants were asked to take 9 to 12 photographs of things that make them life feel meaningful. One week later, participants returned, viewed, and described their photographs. After the intervention, significant within-person improvements in the levels of meaning in life, life satisfaction, and positive affect were observed.



Author

This tool was created by Michael Steger (Ph.D.).



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to offer clients a simple and playful way to explore meaning in their lives intuitively.



Advice

- This intervention can easily be incorporated into therapeutic approaches that aim to clarify clients’ values, like, for instance, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.
- Because this intervention can be easily completed by using the camera on the phone, it may be an attractive and feasible way for younger clients, who are used to take pictures using their phones, to explore meaning in their lives.

- An additional benefit of this intervention is that it is not wholly dependent on language. This makes a potentially interesting tool for clients who struggle to express their feelings in words, clients who are more visual than verbal, or clients with lower intellectual abilities.
- The potential benefit of using this intervention with clients is twofold. First, the very act of consciously considering meaningful aspects of one's life may enhance the client's self-reflection and his/her ability to gain a clearer insight into what matters most in life. Second, discussing the pictures with the client can offer rich, deeply personal information as a topic of exploration within therapy.
- It is important to bear in mind that this intervention has been studied in only one experiment and that the results are preliminary. The results should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, there was no control group in this study, making it impossible to rule out other factors that might have boosted well-being (e.g., taking photos in general). Second, because only university students were tested in this study, it remains unclear whether the findings would generalize to other populations.



References

- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations of the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1069-1081.
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- Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2014). Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 3, 27-30.
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Meaningful Photography

Instructions

In this exercise, you are going to take time to recognize and appreciate things that matter most to you in life.

1. Over the next week, take photographs of things that make your life feel meaningful or full of purpose. These can be photographs of people, objects, places, pets, and the like. If you are not able to take photos of these things—for instance, because they are not nearby—you can take photos of reminders, souvenirs, websites, or even other photos. Try to take at least nine photographs.
2. At the end of the week, if you used a digital camera or your phone's camera, upload your photos to a computer. If you used a non-digital camera, have your photos developed.
3. Once you have collected all your photos and items, take the time to look at and reflect on each one. For each photo, write down a response to the following question: "What does this photo represent, and why is it meaningful?"