

SENSE OF MEANING

Brief No. 4

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This is the fourth brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. In this brief, we focus on sense of meaning, a component of emotional well-being.

Module 4 Objectives

By the end of Module 4, you will be able to:

1. Define sense of meaning and its connection to emotional well-being.
2. List factors that shape a person's sense of meaning.
3. Recall strategies for building sense of meaning.

As a reminder, we define emotional well-being as:

Emotional well-being has many parts that capture how positive an individual feels generally, and about their life overall. It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and goal pursuit

These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and age¹.

What is sense of meaning?

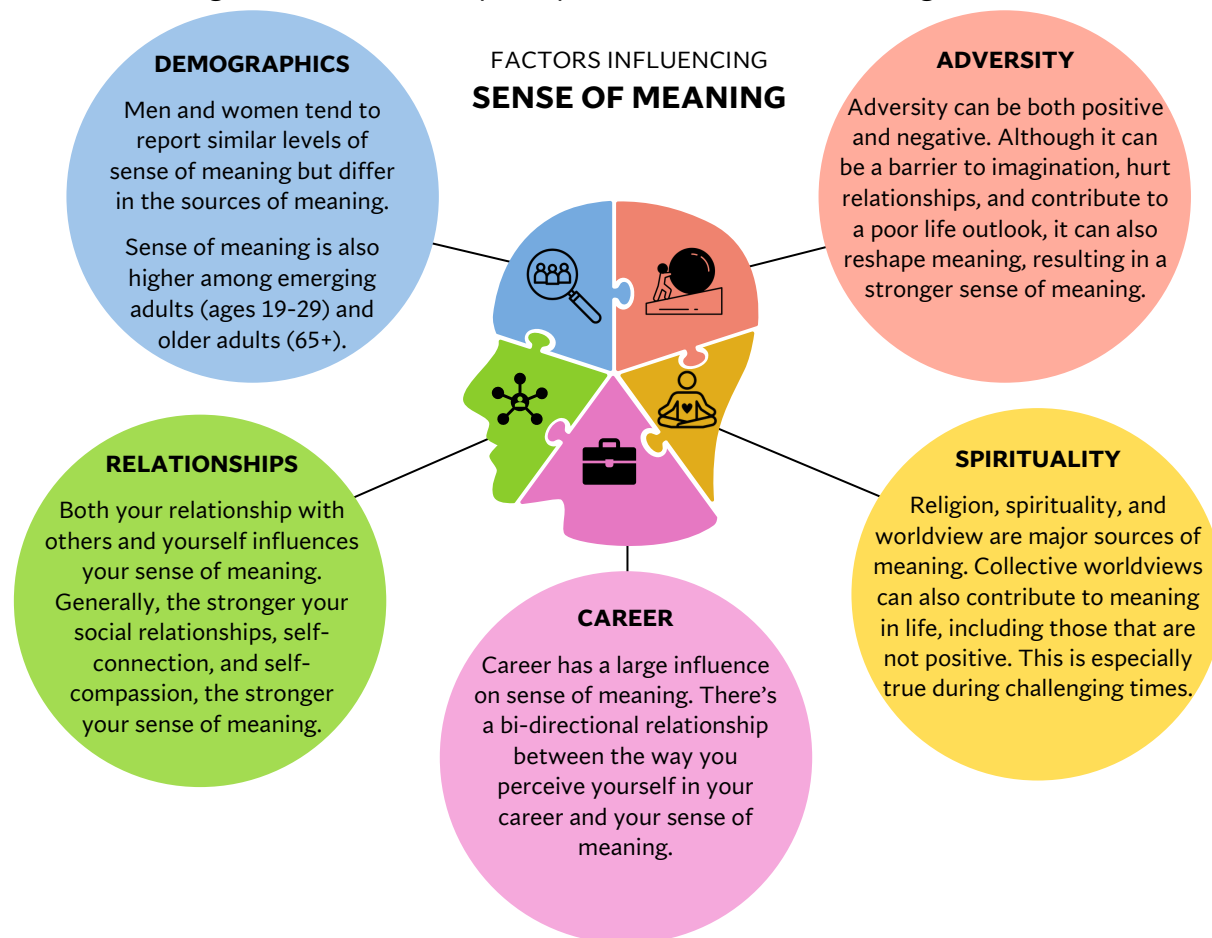
Sense of meaning is one of the reflective features of emotional well-being. Sense of meaning has also been referred to as meaning in life. Basically, it's the feeling or perception that your life is purposeful, significant, and worthwhile. Sense of meaning involves an understanding that your activities, relationships, and experiences hold value and contribute to something beyond yourself.

Sense of meaning has three components: coherence, purpose, and significance².

Coherence	Purpose	Significance
Experiencing coherence in your life means feeling like your past, present, and future all fit together in a way that makes sense.	Purpose is feeling that what you do is guided by goals that are important to you.	Significance, also known as existential mattering, means feeling like your life is important. It's the sense that your life matters and will make a lasting difference.

What influences sense of meaning?

Sense of meaning can be influenced by many factors, like shown in the figure below^{4,5,6}.



How can I strengthen my sense of meaning?

You can intentionally do things to build meaning in life. To create a stronger sense of meaning, focus on aligning your actions with your values. Engaging in self-reflection offers a great start!

Your Turn!

Below are two activities that give you an opportunity to reflect on your actions and goals to move to your powerful sense of meaning. Pull out your Module 4 Handout and give the following activities a try.



Your Best Self

Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could.

You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all your life goals. **Now write about what you imagined.** Be as specific as possible. Don't worry about being realistic – assume that you'll succeed. When you're done, read what you've written and take a moment to appreciate it.



List a dozen daily activities that you complete, regardless of their meaning.

Identify one activity to do **less of**, one to do **more of**, and one to do **differently**.

Assess how it changes your day-to-day experiences.

For a Deeper Dive

To learn more, check out the following resources:

Greater Good Science Center Magazine

[Three Ways to See Meaning in Your Life](#)

This article discusses three pathways to finding a greater sense of meaning in your life.

[How Purpose Changes Across Your Lifetime](#)

This article discusses how our sense of purpose changes across the lifespan.

[Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale](#)

This questionnaire assesses the different parts of meaning in life: coherence, purpose, and mattering.

Annual Review of Psychology

[The Science of Meaning in Life](#)

This open access research article defines meaning in life and its three components before diving into experiences that can enhance meaning in life.

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¹ Park, C. L., Kubzansky, L. D., Chafouleas, S. M., Davison, R. J., Keltner, D., Parsafar, P., Conwell, Y., Martin, M. Y., Hanmer, J., & Wang, K. H. (2023). Emotional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters. *Affective Science*, 4(1), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00163-0>

² George, L. S., & Park, C. L. (2016). Meaning in life as comprehension, purpose, and mattering: Toward integration and new research questions. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(3), 205–220. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000077>

³ Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Meaning in life across the life span: Levels and correlates of meaning in life from emerging adulthood to older adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4, 43–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802303127>

⁴ Steger, M. F., & Dik, B. J. (2009). If one is looking for meaning in life, does it help to find meaning in work? *Health and Well-Being*, 1(3), 303–320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01018.x>

⁵ Stavrova, O., & Luhmann, M. (2016). Social connectedness as a source and consequence of meaning in life. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 470–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1117127>

⁶ Halama, P. (2014). Meaning in Life and Coping: Sense of Meaning as a Buffer Against Stress. In A. Batthyany & P. Russo-Netzer (Eds.), *Meaning in Positive and Existential Psychology* (pp. 239–250). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-0308-5_14



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