

## EXPERIENTIAL APPRECIATION AS A HEALTH AND LIFE PROTECTIVE RESOURCE

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### Abstract

*Considering the multidimensional structure of the Meaning in Life (MIL) concept, the present paper highlights the importance of experiential appreciation (EA) as one of the key health protective or restorative inner resources sustaining the process of recovery or healing from traumatic/adverse experiences as well the adaptive/proactive coping in various life situations. The ability to connect things (in the form of comprehension, purpose and mattering) is tied to the appreciation of the lived experience to develop a more nuanced yet dynamic understanding of the meaning in life variable. The main purposes of this research were to design and to implement a humanistic-experiential scenario based on the experiential expressive-creative techniques (creative meditation, guided imagery, drawing, and music) to increase the level of experiential appreciation as well as the general meaning in life state. Statistical analyses (Paired Samples T Test) confirmed the efficiency of the experiential scenario. Consistent with other recent studies, our findings suggest that simply appreciating one's experiences can facilitate the conscious access to the resource of confidence that life is worth living, a resource that emphasizes growth and personal development and not a simple reducing symptoms approach.*

*Keywords: meaning in life, quality of life, expressive-creative techniques, nature connectedness*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important resource that emerges in the process of the humanistic experiential psychotherapeutic process refers to a higher appreciation of life, of personal existence and experience throughout the life span and in the present. Each person develops a unique sense of meaning using their own criteria for meaning (Steger et al, 2006) that is profoundly connected to the innate human need to find meaning and significance in their lives (Frankl, 1963). The presence of meaning has been associated with various health aspects, such as psychological well-being and quality of life (Damásio et al, 2013) with different levels and correlates across life span (Steger et al, 2009) and it becomes a very important, protective resource for persons living with a chronic or life-threatening illness (Park et al (2008) and for the palliative patients (Bernard et al, 2017). Recent researches (Ward, et al 2023) explored the process of coping with daily stressors and identified a strong association between meaning in life and positive interpretation, proactive planning and coping self-efficacy.

In the last ten years many efforts have been made to develop more nuanced yet dynamic descriptions of the meaning in life variable, able to sustain a better scientific assessment and

research. The ability to experience one's life as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world - in the form of comprehension, purpose and mattering (George and Park, 2016, p.2) or significance, purpose, and coherence (Martela et al (2022) has been connected with the appreciation of the lived experience (experiential appreciation – Kim et al, 2022). Meaning is viewed as a synergic process, emerging from multiple psychological mechanisms interacting and working together (needs and values, such as creative, attitudinal and experiential values; cognitive and metacognitive processes; motivational and affective states; memories; goals and plans for the future; sensations and perceptions from the present moment experience).

The present study incorporates this unifying, synergic perspective regarding meaning in life and it proposes to develop a humanistic-experiential scenario based on the experiential expressive-creative techniques (creative meditation, guided imagery, drawing, and music) to increase the level of experiential appreciation as well as the general meaning in life state.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Materials and methods**

Experimental design, psychometrical methods, expressive-creative methods, observation, and statistical methods were used in the present study.

### **Variables**

The main dependent variable was general meaning in life score. Other dependent variables were: experiential appreciation, comprehension, purpose and mattering.

The independent variable was the participation on the online expressive-creative experiential scenario.

### **Psychometrical instruments:**

**The Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale** (George and Park, 2016) is a 15 item scale with responses rated on a 7-point scale (from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree). The scale assesses three separate factors of meaning: comprehension, purpose, and mattering. Comprehension refers to the sense of coherence and understanding regarding their lives as perceived by the individuals and it is connected to personal beliefs and sense-making process. Purpose refers to the capacity to experience life as being directed and motivated by valued life goals and it is linked to the process of establishing and pursuing life goals. Mattering is a complex dimension based on the human desire for significance and connected to aspects like religion or spirituality. The existence is felt as being significant, important and valued in the world. The instrument was proved to have good factor structure and reliability and to efficiently differentiate the three factors of meaning.

**Experiential Appreciation Scale** (Kim et al, 2022) is a brief scale of 5 items designed to assess the capacity to value and appreciate person's life experiences. The scale has good psychometric properties.

### **Participants**

22 persons (19 females and 3 males) students at an Social Assistance Master participated in this study as a part of their activity at a Counselling laboratory.

### **Procedure**

The experiential scenario was conducted within the activities of an online Counseling laboratory for a period of four hours. All the participants completed the instruments measuring experiential appreciation and meaning in life (comprehension, purpose, and mattering) before and after the experiential exercises.

First, through a guided imagery exercise, the participants were invited to recall the last week, day by day, as detailed as possible, and to select a meaningful event or experience, that had a positive impact on their life. Then, each one told the group about this event or experience. They were encouraged to describe, as much as they felt comfortable to share, how they felt, what they were thinking, their actions, internal body sensations and perceptions and the personal interpretation of this experience.

After a short break, the experiment continued with a creative meditation exercise - An invitation to the forest, using a musical background (sounds from nature). This creative meditation has emphasized the person's presence in the moment, with a focus on the sensory awareness during the forest walk. At the end, the participants were invited to draw their experience and to share it to the group giving details about their present needs and resources.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Statistical analyses (Paired Samples T Test) confirmed the efficiency of the experiential creative scenario. The most significant difference before and after the experiential creative exercises refers to the experiential appreciation ( $t=4,127$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). After the experiment, the participants expressed an increased experiential appreciation. Statistical results revealed significant differences also for Meaning in life (general score  $t=2,521$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and Mattering dimension of Meaning in life ( $t=2,132$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). There were no significant differences for the other two dimensions: Comprehension and Purpose.

#### **Discussions**

The most important effect of the experiential creative scenario refers to the experiential appreciation. The two experiential exercises gave the participants the possibility first to actualize a significant experience from the past and then to connect it with personal needs and resources, in the present. The Invitation to forest creative meditation provoked the participants to explore nature in a deeper, more profound and meaningful interaction that gave them the feeling that their life is connected to the world around them in ways that generate value.

They explored the experience of being integrated in the lively, energetic, and full of life nature and so they were able to actualize the resources of appreciation and faith. This resource was initially related to the intrinsic beauty of the moment and then it extended over their entire life and the universe.

Their life was seen as valuable, full of meaning and significance. This perspective encouraged the participants to develop a deeper sense of personal value and a more profound connection to the self, and to extend this perspective from the present over the future (the Comprehension and Purpose dimensions of Meaning in life).

### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Consistent with other recent studies, our findings suggest that simply appreciating one's experiences can facilitate the conscious access to the resource of confidence that life is worth living, a resource that emphasizes growth and personal development and not a simple reducing symptoms approach.

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