

MEANING IN LIFE, MEANING-FOCUSED COPING AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING OF PARENTS RAISING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

The relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being is complex. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between global and situational meaning in life of parents of children with disabilities with their family satisfaction and subjective happiness as measures of their subjective well-being. In addition, the study examines whether the benefit-finding strategy, a strategy that focuses on meaning in life, mediates the relationship between meaning in parents' lives with their subjective well-being. The sample consisted of 186 parents, the majority of whom were female, who completed self-report questionnaires measuring the presence of meaning in life (as a global meaning measure), personal control (as a situational meaning measure), benefit-finding strategy, family satisfaction, and subjective happiness (as subjective well-being measures). Results showed that both the presence of meaning and personal control were positively related to family satisfaction and subjective happiness. In addition, the benefit-finding strategy was found to act as a mediating factor, i.e. it explained part of the predictive relationship between the presence of meaning in life and personal control with the dimensions of subjective well-being studied. These findings may be useful for mental health professionals aiming to improve the subjective well-being of parents of children with disabilities. In the counseling process, training parents in the benefit-finding strategy can empower them by replacing negative perceptions of disability with its positive effects or consequences.

Keywords: *Meaning in life, subjective well-being, benefit finding strategy, parents, disability.*

1. Introduction

The birth and upbringing of a child with a disability is undoubtedly a major life event for parents and other family members. Previous research has shown that the presence of a child with a disability is likely to cause 'psychological distress', with serious and long-lasting effects on the family. On the other hand, in a significant number of studies, parents of children with disabilities report positive effects on their family life and satisfactory subjective well-being (Bayat, 2007; Jess et al., 2017). Many factors influence parents' subjective well-being, one of which is the coping strategies they choose to deal with the challenges of their child's disability, especially those focusing on meaning in life, such as the benefit finding strategy. In the present study, in order to understand the relationships between meaning in life, subjective well-being and the benefit-finding strategy, the Meaning Making Model was adopted.

The Meaning Making Model (George & Park, 2016) assigns an important role to meaning in life in explaining how individuals cope with serious life events. The model describes two levels of meaning: global and situational meaning. Global meaning includes beliefs, goals and our subjective sense of meaning in life. Situational meaning involves the evaluation of a specific stressor. A key principle of the model is that, when individuals perceive a significant discrepancy between global and situational meaning, they are likely to experience psychological distress and low levels of subjective well-being (Park, 2010). In this situation, efforts to reduce the discrepancy are initiated through the use of coping strategies to recreate meaning. In the case of parents expecting a child, most assume that their child will be healthy and follow a normal developmental pattern. If this is not the case, a diagnosis of disability is likely to violate their beliefs about the fairness of what has happened to them. To resolve this discrepancy between global and situational meaning, parents should either reassess their global meaning or change their situational meaning to a more favorable understanding of the situation so that it does not lead to distress and low subjective well-being (Park, 2010).

Meaning in life is one of the many factors that contribute to subjective well-being (Hammerton, 2022), especially when faced with adversity. One dimension of global meaning, subjective sense (presence) of meaning in life, was found to associate with increased subjective well-being, even among parents of children with intellectual disabilities and/or autism (Griffin & Gore, 2023).

The situational meaning is also an important factor in the process of coping with stressful situations. According to the Meaning Making Model, it is not the event itself that can cause stress for an individual, but the way in which the event is evaluated (i.e., situational meaning). The evaluation of the stressor is shaped by whether the individual perceives the event as a threat or a challenge, or whether they believe that they can control the event or that it will have negative and long-term consequences for their life (Park, 2010).

Coping strategies that focus on meaning in life involve the evaluations that individuals make about their life in general (global meaning) and specifically about the stressor (situational meaning), with the aim of reducing the discrepancy between global and situational meaning, improving psychological adjustment during or after a stressful event, and ensuring subjective well-being. Such strategies include benefit finding, positive reappraisal, and reordering of priorities (Ahmadi et al., 2022). In this study, we examine a benefit finding strategy that focuses on the positive effects and benefits of disability as perceived by parents, in contrast to previous research that has focused on the negative aspects of disability. A number of studies have highlighted reports of positive outcomes, changes and emotions in parents and other family members as a result of parenting a child with disabilities (Beighton & Wills, 2019).

2. Objectives

Research has shown that meaning in life is positively associated with the subjective well-being of parents raising a child with a disability (Mines et al., 2015). However, research on meaning-focused coping strategies and their impact on the subjective well-being of parents of children with disabilities is extremely limited. The present study focuses on the benefit finding strategy. Regarding the hypotheses, it is expected that presence of meaning and personal control will be positively related to family satisfaction and subjective happiness (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, benefit finding will be positively related to presence of meaning and personal control, family satisfaction and subjective happiness (Hypothesis 2). Finally, it is expected that benefit finding will mediate the relationship between presence of meaning and personal control with family satisfaction and subjective happiness (Hypothesis 3).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 186 parents (135 mothers and 51 fathers) who had a child aged 3-7 years with a diagnosed disability (autism, mental retardation, motor disabilities, etc.) with a mean age of 39.04 years (range 25-63 years).

3.2. Research instruments

Participants were tested with five questionnaires: (1) Presence of meaning in life was assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) (e.g. 'I understand the meaning of my life'). (2) Personal control was assessed using the respective subscale of the Stress Appraisal Measure (Peacock & Wong, 1990) (e.g., "Do I have the ability to cope well in this situation?"). (3) Benefit Finding Strategy was tested with an improvised scale (e.g. "I have noticed that my child's disability has had a positive impact on third parties (siblings, relatives, community, etc.)"). (4) Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson & Wilson, 1982) (e.g. "How satisfied are you with how close you feel to your family members?"). (5) Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) (e.g. 'How happy do you consider yourself in general').

4. Results

Pearson's correlation coefficients were then calculated between the variables. According to the results (see Table 1), the presence of meaning in life and personal control show a positive, statistically significant correlation with subjective happiness and family satisfaction, confirming the first research hypothesis. It was also found that the benefit-finding strategy was positively correlated with the presence of meaning and personal control, as well as with the dimensions of subjective well-being, verifying our second research hypothesis.

Table 1. Correlations between Presence of Meaning in Life and Personal Control with Family Satisfaction and Subjective Happiness.

	1.	2.	3	4.
1. Presence of meaning in life	-			
2. Personal control	.292	-		
3. Family satisfaction	.332**	.329**	-	
4. Subjective Happiness	.394**	.340**	.315**	-
5. Benefit Finding Strategy	.449**	.363**	.310**	.331**

Note: **p>0.01

In order to test the third research hypothesis about the mediating role of the Benefit Finding Strategy in the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being, a mediation analysis was applied using the PROCESS Model 4 macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2022). First, two models were tested in which the benefit-finding strategy mediated the effect of the presence of meaning in life on family satisfaction and subjective happiness. The analyses (see Table 2) showed that the direct effects of meaning in life on the benefit-finding strategy and the benefit-finding strategy on family satisfaction and subjective happiness were statistically significant. In addition, the indirect effects of purpose in life on family satisfaction and subjective happiness were also found to be statistically significant. Therefore, since both direct and indirect effects were found to be statistically significant, there is a partial mediation of the benefit-finding strategy on the effect of the presence of meaning in life on family satisfaction and subjective happiness. Next, two respective models were tested in which the benefit-finding strategy mediated the effect of personal control on family satisfaction and subjective happiness. The analyses (see Table 3) showed that the direct effects of personal control on benefit-finding strategy and benefit-finding strategy on family satisfaction and subjective happiness were statistically significant. In addition, the indirect effects of personal control on family satisfaction and subjective happiness were also found to be statistically significant. As both direct and indirect effects were found to be statistically significant, it is concluded that there is a partial mediation of the utility search strategy on the effect of personal control on family satisfaction and subjective happiness.

Table 2. Direct and Indirect effects of Benefit Finding strategy (BFS) on the relation of Presence of meaning in life (PML) with Family Satisfaction (FS) and Subjective Happiness (SH).

		B	SE	95% Percentage Confidence Lower	Upper
PML→BFS→SH	Direct effects				
	PML→BFS	0.32***	0.04	0.231	0.420
	PML→FS	0.25***	0.05	0.146	0.354
	BFS→FS	0.21*	0.07	0.052	0.367
Indirect effects					
PML→BFS→FS		0.18**	0.05	0.067	0.266
PML→BFS→SH	Direct effects				
	PML→BFS	0.32***	0.04	0.231	0.420
	PML→SH	0.45***	0.07	0.302	0.615
	BFS→SH	0.31*	0.12	0.080	0.553
Indirect effects					
PML→BFS→SH		0.35***	0.08	0.183	0.527

Note: ***p < 0.001 **p < 0.01 *p < 0.05

Table 3. Direct and Indirect effects of Benefit Finding strategy (BFS) on the relation of Personal Control (PC) with Family Satisfaction (FS) and Subjective Happiness (SH).

		B	SE	95% Percentage Confidence	
				Lower	Upper
PC → BFS → FS	Direct effects				
	PC → BFS	0.35***	0.06	0.225	0.493
	PC → FS	0.33***	0.07	0.197	0.480
	BFS → FS	0.22*	0.07	0.077	0.378
	Indirect effects				
	PC → BFS → FS	0.25**	0.07	0.108	0.406
PC → BFS → SH	Direct effects				
	PC → BFS	0.35***	0.06	0.225	0.493
	PC → SH	0.54***	0.11	0.323	0.760
	BFS → SH	0.38**	0.11	0.155	0.616
	Indirect effects				
	PC → BFS → SH	0.40**	0.11	0.175	0.631

Note: ***p < 0.001 **p < 0.01 *p < 0.05

5. Discussion and conclusions

According to the results of this study, presence of meaning (global meaning) and personal control (situational meaning) are positively related to family satisfaction and subjective well-being. This finding is supported by the existing literature: high levels of present meaning and personal control lead to higher levels of subjective well-being for parents of children with disabilities (Hammerton, 2022; Griffin & Gore, 2023). In addition, a meaning-focused strategy has been found to be positively related to dimensions of meaning in life and measures of subjective well-being. In our study, the majority of parents tested focused on the positive aspects of disability using a benefit-finding strategy, acknowledging the benefits of their child's disability. Positive associations of benefit finding were found with both family satisfaction and subjective happiness. Previous research has shown that the use of meaning-focused coping strategies has a positive effect on the subjective well-being of individuals facing serious life events such as a terminal illness (Ahmadi et al., 2002), the COVID -19 pandemic (Arslan & Yildirim, 2021), or a natural disaster such as a major earthquake (Guo et al., 2013).

Finally, the present study confirmed the hypothesis that benefit-finding strategy plays a mediating role in the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being as experienced by parents raising a child with a disability. Specifically, benefit-finding was found to partially mediate the relationship between the presence of meaning and personal control with family satisfaction and subjective happiness. This suggests that individuals who perceive a greater presence of meaning and personal control in their lives and use the benefit-finding strategy have higher levels of family satisfaction and subjective happiness. Thus, cultivating a sense of purpose and personal control may not only directly enhance subjective well-being, but also indirectly influence it through the benefit-finding strategy. This finding is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Beigthon & Willis, 2016, 2018; Dardas & Ahmad, 2015; Whiting, 2012) that in the presence of meaning in life, a benefit-finding strategy that focuses on the positive effects of disability enhances the influence of the cognitive and affective dimensions of subjective well-being.

6. Applications in parent counseling and further research

The findings of this research on the role of the benefit-finding strategy may be useful to mental health professionals who aim to improve the subjective well-being of parents of children with disabilities. Mental health professionals also need to draw parents' attention to the positive experiences and aspects of their relationship with the child in order to help them cope more effectively with the challenges of disability. To this end, training parents in benefit-finding strategies can be a valuable tool, so that negative perceptions of the child's disability can be replaced with more adaptive appraisals that focus on the positive effects or consequences of the event. Therefore, in counseling interventions with these parents, emphasis needs to be placed on reflecting on, discovering or realizing the potential benefits associated with their child's disability, as this may contribute to their empowerment and improve their subjective well-being.

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