

KANSAS INITIATIVE FOR MEANINGFUL HEALTH

Meaningful Health for Life

Mental Health Significance of Meaning and Purpose in Life

Position: Integrating a sense of meaning and purpose in life with behavioral health treatment will lead to improved health outcomes.

The Problem: For behavioral health care to be effective, it must be available and acceptable to its recipients. Initial purchase cost and ongoing administrative fidelity burdens make many evidence-based practices unavailable to wide segments of the population. Treatments that are available are often seen as unacceptable when those treatments are perceived as viewing people as nothing more than objects to be fixed rather than human beings living lives of meaning and value.

Why this matters: The demand for behavioral health services continues to rise each year, while the resources available to provide those services are unable to keep pace with the demand. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment reports that the suicide rate in Kansas rose 30% between 2011 and 2012. The Kansas state hospital system has been chronically over census for many months. The community mental health center system has had to focus its limited resources on serving the most vulnerable members of our communities rather than on developing new and creative ways to deal with community needs.

The body of empirical knowledge that demonstrates the importance of meaning and purpose in life to health outcomes is sound, but largely unknown and unavailable to the current behavioral health system. It is known, however, that meaning in life is correlated with well-being, improved mental health, and improved physical health. Purpose in life is predictive of reduced suicidality, reduced criminality, and reduced use of substances.

The bottom line: Because meaning in life increases treatment compliance, persons in need recover more quickly, leading to increased availability of limited behavioral health resources. Because meaning in life is highly individual, treatments that focus on this approach are acceptable among a wide range of populations. The balanced understanding of the meaningful health approach, that a person is not free from conditions of life and yet retains freedom to choose a response to those conditions, resonates with those who wish to live lives of recovery.

Need more information? Drill deeper into this issue on the back of this page.

The Meaningful Health approach is based on the pioneering work of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl. Over fifty years of solid research stands behind his meaningful health concepts.

The rest of the story about Meaningful Health

Dr. Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, had a personal stake in the effectiveness of his approach. Surviving the greatest trauma in human history, he based his system of psychology on the understanding that a person is always free to choose a stand toward the conditions of life no matter how limiting they might be. This freedom to choose is a uniquely human phenomenon, just as love, art, and beauty are uniquely human experiences. His therapeutic approach involves harnessing this uniquely human aspect of a person as a source of resilience to physical, psychological, and behavioral disease and distress.

His landmark book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is listed by the Library of Congress as one of the ten most influential books in the United States. At the time of Frankl's death in 1997, the book had sold more than 10 million copies and had been translated into 24 languages.

A recent search of the PsycINFO database of the American Psychological Association reveals over 600 empirical abstracts directly related to Frankl's approach. Moreover, physicians at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center conducted randomized controlled trials indicating that Frankl's approach decreased anxiety, hopelessness, and desire for death while improving spiritual well-being and a sense of meaning in life in persons with Stage III or IV cancer. This is consistent with multiple correlational studies conducted in behavioral health over a period exceeding fifty years.

Highlights of Meaningful Health Outcomes

The most well-documented findings on the importance of meaning and purpose in life, based on over 20 empirical studies, demonstrate that:

- A positive correlation exists between meaning and measures of well-being and coping,
- An inverse correlation exists between meaning and a diagnosis of mental illness,
- When mental illness does occur, an inverse correlation exists between meaning and symptom severity.

Other well-documented findings, based on 10 to 20 empirical studies, demonstrate that:

- An inverse correlation exists between reasons for living, or purpose in life, and suicidality,
- An inverse correlation exists between meaning and a diagnosis of substance use disorders,
- A positive correlation exists between meaning and health.

Emerging findings, based on less than 10 empirical studies, include:

- Meaning in life is positively correlated with occupational functioning,
- An inverse correlation exists between meaning and criminal or antisocial behavior,
- Meaning in life is positively correlated with social functioning.