



Finding Meaning and Purpose during a Health Crisis

By: [Glen R. Horst MDiv, DMin, BA](#)

For most adults, good health and the ability to make personal choices are basic to meaningful living. You find meaning in working and earning a living, in your choices about recreation and leisure, and in controlling your daily activities. A life-limiting illness can shatter this sense of meaning and purpose. So, how can you re-build the sense that your life is meaningful?

Your meaning and purpose reflect your culture, your life experience and your personal nature. Although there is no one right way to make your life meaningful, this article provides some ideas that may help.

Finding meaning in the here and now

Most of us live our lives focused on the future. We make plans for our career, our children and our financial security. Illness can take the enjoyment out of thinking about the future. You may feel worried, frightened or uncertain about it. Or, you may feel that illness has taken away your ability to plan for the future, creating a hole in your life. Focusing on the present, instead of the future, may be one way to find new meaning.

Ways to stay in the here and now and to calm your fears about the future include:

- focusing on today's routines and getting on with them;
- finding whatever is good about the present moment and being grateful for it;
- adjusting to simpler tasks or smaller duties that give satisfaction.

It may be difficult for you to accept that life right now is enough and that you have much to live for in the moment. Even though life is difficult, you may find that there are still moments that offer joy, peace or appreciation. A visit from a close friend, for example, may help you see value in life, even in the midst of a difficult day.

Finding meaning in relationships

For many people, relationships are central to their understanding of meaning and purpose. These relationships may be with family – partners, spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, and siblings – or with other people who know them well. You can affirm the meaning you find in relationships in many ways:

- reminiscing together
- talking about the way the illness is changing family life or relationships
- enjoying favourite activities, places or rituals together
- openly expressing your love, affection and gratitude to people who are important to you
- working through treatment decisions and changes in roles and needs
- letting go of old hurts and resentments
- asking for forgiveness from those you have hurt
- celebrating each birthday, anniversary, and holiday as if it were your last.

A note about family relationships

This may be a very tender and difficult time in your family relationships. You and your family members know in a new way that family relationships are both fragile and precious. You and your family may struggle with fears of losing your connection through death. Your family may wonder how to support you during your illness. You may worry about how some family members will survive without you.

Both you and your family are grieving because of the possibility that death may separate you. You and your family face the difficult challenge of holding each other close during your illness while also letting each other go. Sometimes you will find yourselves out of tune with each other. However, your illness will also provide new opportunities for you and your family to express your love for each other in deeply meaningful ways.

Finding meaning in artistic activities

Creating something can be very satisfying and meaningful for some. For example, writing or drawing can provide a way to express thoughts or feelings about your illness that are difficult to speak aloud.

Perhaps you appreciate the works of other artists and find meaning through one of the following:

- looking at a piece of art
- listening to music
- watching a live play or a movie
- sitting in a sacred space
- reading poetry, novels or biographies.

Such activities may deepen the meaning of your own experiences and connect you with other people and the larger world.

Finding meaning in nature

When days of illness confine you indoors, you may long to connect with Mother Earth and nature. There are many ways of satisfying this desire including the following:

- breathing fresh air
- feeling the wind or snowflakes or sunshine on your skin
- observing the clouds, sunrises, sunsets, stars or moon
- listening to bird songs or animal calls
- tasting a freshly picked fruit or vegetable
- smelling wild flowers or autumn woods
- spending time in a garden, a park or at a lakeside
- lying on the grass or sitting on a garden chair
- dangling your feet in a creek or river
- floating on a lake
- following the changing seasons and reflecting on change, loss and rebirth in human life.

Knowing with all your senses that you are part of the world can give you a sense of having a meaningful place in the big scheme of things. If you are unable to go outside because of your illness, you could talk with your caregivers about ways to connect you with nature.

Finding meaning in religion and spirituality

Many people find meaning and purpose in religion and spirituality. If you consider yourself religious, you may wish to maintain or renew your connection with your faith community and its practices. Praying, reading sacred texts, keeping sacred symbols nearby or attending religious services could give you hope and guidance. Connections with your faith community may remind you that you have a place in a tradition and community that flows on through the generations.

Your spirituality can help you cope with your illness even if you are not a member of a faith community. By staying in touch with what is important to you and with the people who are part of this, you can experience and renew your inner strength and depth.

In the course of your illness, you may need to re-discover, deepen or re-shape your religious faith or philosophy of life. You may question previously held beliefs, experience periods of doubt, or suffer a loss of faith for periods. You may struggle with "why" questions such as these:

"Why me?"

"Why now?"

"Why is God doing this?"

"Why does God allow this to happen?"

Traditional explanations for human suffering may prove inadequate. Turning to a spiritual care provider, spiritual leader, or other good listener for conversation at such times could be helpful for finding a satisfying way of understanding what you are going through.

Finding meaning through your attitude

Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, emphasized the importance of the attitude a person takes toward a fate that cannot be changed. He learned that the human spirit has a defiant power capable of facing the most difficult situations with courage and dignity. He believed that the attitude you take toward your suffering could give fulfillment and meaning in itself.

Frankl's perspectives can give fresh meaning when you feel discouraged or overwhelmed by your situation. They encourage you to:

- focus on how you want to be and live, in a situation you cannot change;
- dig deeper for hidden strength and inner resources and to reach higher to be all that you can be;
- hope for something good to come out of a bad situation.

Why bother looking for meaning and purpose anyway?

Finding meaning and purpose in the midst of illness may seem like hard work. This may be especially true when you're forced to look for meaning in completely new places. The payoff in knowing that your life has value, no matter how sick your body might be, is that you may find you're able to accept your situation and feel better about it.

Content reviewed January 2023