Chapter 2

Purpose in Life

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the basic principles of existential psychology.
2. Summarize findings about the influence of coherence, purpose in life, and existential hardiness on well-being.
3. Explain the role of spirituality and religion in adjustment.
4. Describe the effects of choice and free will on individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

He remembered the discussion quite well. The day had been bright and sunny. His mom had nagged at him about some little detail regarding his college application, but he knew it was her way of handling her nervousness at the prospect of his leaving. So they had an extended discussion regarding his application to an out-of-state school. No, he did not have to go out of state. There were plenty of very good schools near his home. And, yes, the distance to the out-of-state school would put him more than a day's travel away from his family, friends, and his significant other of 2 years. But he had promised his teacher to at least try to get into that out-of-state school. It was something special. He knew it from the way the teacher had spoken of the college. So, he intended to at least try. He knew that it meant leaving his family and friends behind. There would be new friendships and relationships. Even the weather would be different. He would have to find out what to wear and when to wear it—in a more social vein, what was acceptable clothing for classes and what to wear in the dorms. They were small things, but they would punctuate that his life at home had come to an end and a new life in college had begun.

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This story may have been your story. Or it could be one that you are familiar with, secondhand or thirdhand. People make decisions and put a lot of effort into goals and dreams to which they have made some sort of commitment. The importance of our finding those commitments in life and the purpose that drives them are the topic of this chapter. We believe that we seek to find meaning and **purpose in life**. As we shall see, the psychological research in this area is derived from an existential perspective. By that, we mean an important aspect to our life is driven by our awareness of our existence and what that awareness calls us to do (Frankl, 1959/1985; May, 1960).

In this chapter, we will define ***existential psychology***, explore what our awareness of the **impermanence** to our life and life circumstances does to us, examine some of the areas that support the importance of meaning in our life, and then consider what that can mean in terms of a broadened worldview, which encompasses **spirituality** and/or **religion**. Psychological studies have demonstrated spiritual and religious factors to be a positive factor in many people's lives. The linkage of spirituality and meaning making is what some propose to be at the core of general findings about the relationship between those who are spiritual or religious and overall health. Finally, the power of choice and free will is explored. Understanding the existential framework, we as humans are aware of being alive and the temporary nature of that life. From this existential perspective comes particular areas of study. One of the most important is the creation of a meaningful life.

Existential Psychology

Existential psychology is a school of thought emphasizing the individual, the realization of being alive, and the results of this awareness of one's life. The power of the individual in forming his or her life is an important element to understanding life and adjustment. Each person has to formulate who he or she is and how he or she fits into that world.

American existential psychology is usually associated with psychologists Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irvin Yalom. Frankl is acknowledged as one of the earliest and best known proponents of the existential approach in the United States. For May (1960) "existentialism involves centering on the existing person and . . . the human

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being . . . emerging, becoming" (p. 11). Yalom (1980) identified four basic topics for existential psychology:

1. Dealing with our awareness of impermanence, change, and "death"
2. Finding purpose and meaning in life
3. Making choices in our life and taking responsibility for those choices
4. Contending with our ultimate autonomy and aloneness

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Existential psychology emphasizes the individual, the realization of being alive, and the results of this awareness.

This chapter follows these four points and the supportive psychological findings related to them. While not necessarily defined as existential in nature, there are several lines of research that highlight these very concerns over change and sense of mortality, the importance of meaning and purpose in life, and our desire to be in control of our lives and make our own decisions. The importance of the individual, their active interpretation of their environment, and their engagement with that environment is emphasized. This is the result of the human capacity for awareness of their existence and of their interactions with their world.

Change, Impermanence, and Awareness of Death

It seems inevitable that life brings change. The first chapter pointed to this inevitability. The research over several decades supports the negative reaction that can come with change (Dohrenwend, 2006). Extending the concept of change to that of *impermanence* (defined as being transient or unenduring, from *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* ["Impermanence," 1993]) seems a defendable point, given our language. The Buddhist tenet of impermanence believes change to be a natural part of life (Goldstein, 2002; Rinpoche, 1992). Assuming this impermanence, attempting to hold on to things that will not last is illusory and can lead only to frustration, grief, and suffering. What makes change so hard to accept and live with?

Viktor Frankl (1959/1985) told the story of his life in a concentration camp during World War II. He witnessed daily abuse, murder, and living conditions of the worst kind. Yet he also found acts of compassion, sacrifice, and the expression of human dignity within the dire camp conditions. His insight was that finding meaning to one's existence made all the difference. Even a world gone "crazy" had hope when there was purpose in one's life.

In a second seminal existential psychology text, Rollo May (1960) described the evolution of his own perspective. Following a diagnosis of cancer and facing his own mortality, he engaged his work with renewed effort to describe and understand the process of being in the world.

The realization of our temporal nature and our desire for purpose in life is important to living. Our world is impermanent. It is always changing. Heraclitus, the Roman philosopher, provided us with a concise way to think of it. The river flows and thus is always different. As stated in the first chapter, we are also always changing—physically and psychologically.

Psychological research has found that change brings upset and health risk (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Reviewing research that spans several decades of work, life change increases the risk of disorders (Dohrenwend, 2006). This link is supported by over 9,000 related articles published between 1967 and 2005. While life changes as a stressor is discussed in a later chapter on stress and coping, for now, note that changes in life have consistently been linked to health or mental health problems. Impermanence and contending with it has proven problematic to human experience. For an example close to your own experience, remember when you first went to college. There were people and places you left behind. You made new friends and had to deal with new demands. These changes brought new challenges to your life. For many, this is not an easy time.

While there is a tendency to think of the self as permanent and unchanging, the psychological reality is that situations influence individuals, and those situations are continuously changing (Baumeister, 1991). As noted in Chapter 1, with maturity comes shifts in physical development and social expectations. Life-changing events, like going to college, meeting a significant other, or getting a job promotion, all have their effects and make life different. These variations can be in everyday matters like energy level, mood, clarity of thought, or sense of direction.

So the world is changing, the person and situations are changing. Change brings "disequilibrium" in contending with the novelty and the resulting shift from a previously calm or balanced state (Hirschberger & Shaham, 2012). Change and unpredictability have effects at the physiological as well as the psychological levels (Burger & Arkin, 1980; Mineka & Henderson, 1985; Mineka & Kihlstrom, 1978; Shors, Foy, Levine, & Thompson, 1990). Change can be perceived as risky. The worries of potential loss typically outweigh the opportunities for gain (Barbaris, 2013; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). So there is the tendency to believe that all will remain permanently as it always has been, yet naturally, change is inevitable (Hirschberger & Shaham, 2012).

Existential psychologists have researched what happens when this realization of change includes the realization of mortality—that is, death is inevitable (Arndt, Landau, Vail, & Vess, 2013; Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). When reminded that existence can cease, the reaction to this realization or reminder is an assertion of life. This area of research is called experimental existential psychology.

Experimental Existential Psychology

Reminding people of death activates strong reactions. The threat of death raises the themes of meaning and purpose in life. The response to such reminders is to emphatically endorse life in a meaningful, socially connected way (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). This work has been labeled **terror management theory**. To manage the terror of death, people remind themselves that they are alive and connected to others who carry on their legacy (children or like-minded persons).

Simply being asked to think of our death triggers "terror management" reactions. But this fear of death can also take the form of social and psychological death, such as ostracism or alienation. Studies have measured unconscious reactions to stimuli so subtle that the participant is not aware of the stimuli being presented (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001).

For example, students might be asked to think about their own death (called mortality salience) or to think of a neutral topic, like going for a walk or taking a test. Following this exercise, the students who thought of death were more likely to talk about how healthy they were. This was a reaction to the fear of death and illness that the exercise had prompted. When asked for the first word that comes to mind, death-prompt students said things related to death such as grave or cemetery. The nonprompted students might say water or walk. A second type of threat reaction is an increase in defending their worldviews. In one

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Cherry blossoms are appreciated all the more for their brief season.

study, this defensiveness took the form of increased national pride (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006). If one's ideas or ideals live on, one has overcome death.

One study found that thinking of death increased students' desires to have children (Fritsche et al., 2007). Having children was a way "not to die" but to continue on. Typically, mortality salience would increase people's hostility to out-group members. However, when thinking of children, these negative attitudes are softened. They are a way to "cheat death."

The topic of death did not have to be conscious to the participants. When death or death topics were briefly flashed on a screen for 46 milliseconds, subjects thought more about death and became more defensive of their views of the world (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). Without being aware of it, death affects people. When faced with death, the typical reaction is to assert oneself and "insist" that one is alive and has purpose in that life. This also works when one's group or "culture" is challenged. Holbrook, Sousa, and Hahn-Holbrook (2011) found that hints of uncertainty to worldview led to stronger affirmations of that worldview.

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Children provide a sense of continuity to the future.

> Awareness of death represents a formidable challenge in human existence . . . and there is coherence and existential depth to the idea that people, when reminded of their impermanence may cling to meanings and beliefs . . . (Yet, it should be noted that) people typically engage life—that is, they seek challenges, connections, authentic meaning, and significance—not because they are trying to avoid the scent of death, but because they are healthy and alive. (Ryan & Deci, 2004, p. 473)

The Importance of Purpose and Meaning

We are a meaning-making species (Baumeister, 1991; Cacioppo, Hawkley, Rickett, & Masi, 2005), and as such, there is a need to make sense of our world. *Meaning* is defined as a "sense of what is and a sense of why this should be so" (Proulx, Markman, & Lindberg, 2013). Meaning helps us to explain the complexities of the world around us. Given that so much information is available, the ability to find meaning and organize that information is important. This order and structure help to deal with our world. In the face of a changing world, we can find solace in meaning (Baumeister, 1991). As noted by Cacioppo et al. (2005), at the basic neurological level, our brain dedicates 32% and 23% of its mass to those portions that have to do with thinking and dealing with our social interactions, respectively. Whereas other species' brains are dedicated to sensation and action, we biologically "spend" our biological mass and energy on processing and coordinating, ordering and structuring, and generally making sense of the sensations. We are neurologically constructed to think and to interact with others.

Purpose and meaning in life have been extensively researched over several decades. The conclusion from this research seems clear: Purpose and meaning are related to well-being (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, 2012).

This relationship is so compelling, the question was raised: Are happiness and meaning the same thing (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013)? Baumeister et al. (2013) found that while meaning and happiness are highly related—they were different. Happiness is present focused—that is, I like where I am now. Meaning is an integration of past, present, and future—that is, I understand what has happened, is happening, and what will happen. Happiness appears to be a response to need fulfillment—for example, I am enjoying my meal. Meaning is not related to need fulfillment, so having a meal has no effect on understanding my world. Happiness seems based on an individual focus, such as how one feels, and meaning is other-focused, or how one can contribute to the well-being of all. Therefore, while there is a strong relationship between meaning and happiness, the two are different.

Meaningfulness has been studied in a number of forms. While the terms regarding *meaningfulness* have varied, they all refer to the same concept and its definition—meaning intention or purpose (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). Research has confirmed the power of meaning in life, through such concepts as coherence, purpose in life, and existential hardiness.

Coherence

Antonovsky (1979, 1993) found that a **sense of coherence** to one's world was related to health, or what he called salutogenesis. Those who believed their world was "coherent" were both physically and psychologically healthier. A coherent world is one that is understandable and psychologically manageable. This concept has proved powerful in looking at long-term health in the face of everyday adversity (Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2005). Coherence has been related to the positive qualities of life, such as physical and psychological well-being, relationships with others, and feelings of empowerment and fulfillment (Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2007). Coherence was also found to increase with age and experience (Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2005, 2007).

A sense of coherence was the best predictor of health outcomes over a 10-year period (Cedarblad & Hansson, 1995). Coherence was a better predictor than intelligence, feelings of self-mastery, and locus of control. In a follow-up, done after a second 10-year interval, the original sense of coherence continued as a good predictor of successful and healthy development (Dahlin & Cedarblad, 2009).

In a second longitudinal study over a 20-year period, sense of coherence was again found to predict lower rates of mental disorders. This methodology, known as a prospective study, is an especially powerful one at examining factors that can then later predict behavior (Kouvonen et al., 2010).

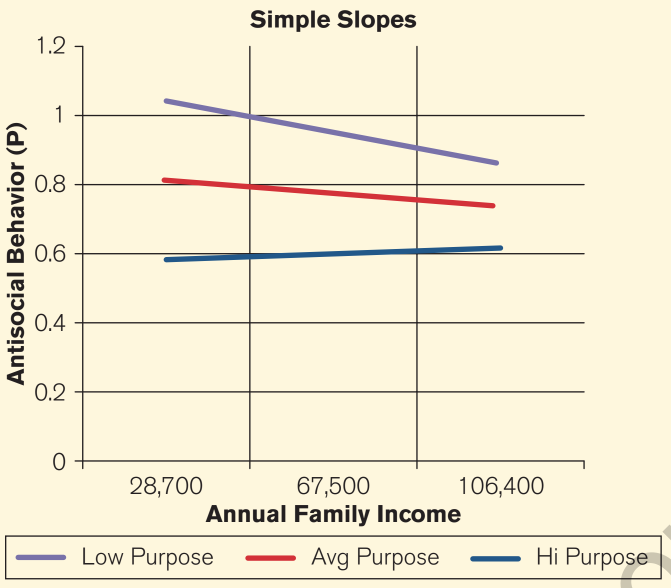
While the use of sense of coherence as a protective factor has been around for several decades and the test has been translated into several languages, researchers continue to find it a significant factor in predicting health.

Purpose in Life

Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) devised a test of purpose in life to try to measure meaning and purpose in one's life. Purpose in life has been found to be related to a person's satisfaction with his or her life in general (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). It has also been found to have protective properties in regard to physical reactivity to life circumstances and to be predictive of lower death rates (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Additionally, purpose in life has been found to be related to lower social anxiety (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013).

Machell, Disabato, and Kashdan (2015) found purpose in life to be related to prosocial behaviors in teenagers. Teens high in purpose were more willing to help others, share, and empathize with others. They volunteered more and provided services for those in the community. Generally, having purpose in life predicted the extent to which adolescents contributed to their communities. They found purpose in life to mediate the negative impact of low income as well as to consistently lower the tendency for antisocial behaviors in teenagers (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 The Moderating Effect of Purpose in Life on Antisocial Tendencies in Teens



While there is a relationship between family income and antisocial behaviors in teens, this effect is not found in those with high purpose in life. Note that there is no family income effect for those with high purpose in life.

Source: Figure 2 from Buffering the negative impact of poverty on youth: The power of purpose in life. Kyla A. Machell, David J. Disabato, Todd B. Kashdan. *Social Indicators Research*. March 2016, Volume 126, Issue 2, pp. 845–861. Used with permission from Springer Science+Business Media.

Among the other positive aspects that purpose in life brings is increased willingness to be in ethnically diverse situations and less perception of threat from these contexts (Burrow, Stanley, Sumner, & Hill, 2014). Additionally, feeling that one had a purpose in life decreased distress over contact with ethnically diverse populations encountered in a real-life situation (Burrow & Hill, 2013). It seems that having a purposeful orientation may open individuals to the world of possibilities and assure them of their own abilities to cope with novelty and change.

Purpose in life and a belief that one can make a difference in his or her world are important to new college students (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009). Students who have a purpose in life also feel they can be effective, have support, and stay in college. When the work or tasks seem boring, those with goals that reach beyond themselves persist longer and did better (Yeager et al., 2014). Others have found socially oriented goals in young adults (early 20s) were related to later life interest in growth, continued feelings of purpose, and interest in helping the next generation (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, Lapsley, & Quaranto, 2010). Working solely for achievement–recognition and artistic and financial goals, which are more individualistically focused, did not have the same linkages to a later sense of purpose or altruistic motives. Hill et al. (2010) noted that it matters what our purpose is. Heintzelman and King (2014) reported that most individuals (80% to 90%) feel they have found a sense of purpose to their life. Oishi and Diener (2013) looked at data from 132 countries, finding and affirming that this number averages around 90%.

Existential Hardiness

Those who face change and difficulty yet are able to survive and thrive are called **hardy individuals** (Kobasa, 1979, 1982; Kobasa, Maddi, & Courington, 1981; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982; Kobasa, Maddi, & Puccetti, 1982; Maddi, 2006). Among workers who faced

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Commitment and hardiness influence effort and grades.

job loss or major job changes over the course of a few years, some recovered well and others did not. In dealing with conditions that Maddi (2002) called cataclysmic, researchers found that those who were committed, challenged, and perceived themselves as in control did better.

Kobasa (1979) defined these qualities as follows:

- Committed: having a sense of purpose and drawing meaning from their experiences
- Challenged: seeing new and different situations as opportunities for growth and advancement
- In control: believing one could do things to effect their lives and change what could be difficulties into successes

In a 12-year follow-up study of these same workers, those who experienced job changes were helped by these personal ways of seeing themselves and their world (Maddi, 2002). Additional qualities they added to the list (of being committed, challenged, and in control) were social support and physical exercise (Maddi, 2002).

In a review of research on hardiness, Maddi (2002, 2006) concluded that hardiness related to how both people and organizations dealt with change and uncertainty. The hardy personal qualities helped to dampen the negative effects of change. In addition to the attitudinal qualities of challenge, control, and commitment, specific coping behaviors added to the individual's hardiness (Maddi, 2002). These coping behaviors included building a supportive social environment that was encouraging and helpful, being open to opportunities, and taking decisive action when necessary. A second review of the literature confirmed that people who had hardiness characteristics assembled better support from those around them, were more actively engaged in their world, and were less likely to fall into non-productive ways of responding to life changes and stressors (Eschleman, Bowling, & Alarcon, 2010). Hardy individuals were less likely to be distressed, burned out, frustrated, and acting in destructive ways. They were more likely to be engaged in life, focused on growth, and generally happy and satisfied. Maddi (2002) characterized this hardy personality as having the existential courage to live life (Root, 2016).

Hardy individuals do not react negatively to new situations and appreciate innovation (Maddi et al., 2006). In a study of physiological reactivity, Sandvik et al. (2013) found negative hormonal reactions to stressful conditions when there was a lack of balance among control, commitment, and challenge. High control and commitment without a sense of challenge resulted in these biological responses, placing individuals at risk. See Researching Adjustment: Academic Hardiness and Grit.

RESEARCHING ADJUSTMENT
Academic Hardiness and Grit

Academically, commitment and overall hardiness were found to be positively related to undergraduate grades and final year research projects (Sheard & Golby, 2007). Having long-term goals seemed especially important to good grades and what could be called capstone projects. Yeager et al. (2014) found the power of purpose to be based on goals beyond the individual self (for my neighborhood, for society, for the greater good), which they termed *self-transcendent*. When prompted to consider such self-transcendent motives, college students persisted on tasks and attempted to learn material more deeply. Notably, Yeager and colleagues (2014) also found that such motives were positively related with college graduation. Thinking beyond oneself can be helpful to completion of tasks, especially long-range tasks like completing college.

Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) called this passion for long-term goals and task perseverance—grit. They defined this quality as "working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087–1088). Where others get bored, tired, or discouraged, those with grit stayed the course, continued to work, and found the "finish line." Those with grit would be those who spent the extra time studying, practiced longer or harder, or saw a bad grade as a signal to study harder and not give up. The researchers found this quality to be related to college grade point average, West Point Academy retention, levels of educational attainment (associate's, bachelor's, post graduate degrees), and spelling bee finalists.

These qualities of hardiness and grit increase our chances of success in adjustment to the world at large but especially in situations that are challenging or competitive.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time that your grades or a project benefited from personal extra effort? What motivated you to continue your efforts? In what situations would this be helpful? Not helpful?
2. How might you suggest increasing commitment and hardiness in an individual?

The link between meaning in life and well-being seems clear. Individuals who are able to establish coherence, purpose in life, and existential hardiness have meaningful, well-balanced lives. How do so many of us come to have such meaningful lives?

Spirituality and Religion

One of the ways by which we derive meaning and purpose is through spiritual and religious beliefs and activities (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Religion and spirituality have been a part of psychological considerations for a long time. William James, thought by many to be the "father of American psychology," was involved with religious considerations and gave a series of lectures in 1901 and 1902, which were compiled into a book. The book, titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (James, 1902), explored and considered what religion did for us as humans.

In his work, James made the distinction between **institutional and personal religion**, the first having to do with the many established formal religions that can be found in the world (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism). He deferred on the institutional religions so as not to become engaged in the debate over who is right or wrong. Rather, he dealt with personal religion and personal experience. In the same way, psychology as a science does not take on the theological debates but addresses the human experiences to which spirituality and religion relate.

Religion and spirituality are different concepts in psychology (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013; Schlehofer, Omoto, & Adelman, 2008; Wulff, 1997; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Religion is related to a given set of institutionally

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Spirituality reflects a sense of awe and wonder.

based codes of conduct, values, and ceremonies, which emphasize the symbols and beliefs of a given group. *Spirituality* is, in the broadest sense of the term, a personal worldview that brings appreciation, compassion, caring, a sense of interdependence to our work, and a perspective that reaches beyond the individual (Cacioppo et al., 2005; Wolff, 2010). Pargament, Exline, and Jones (2013) stated succinctly, in spirituality, "There is more to life than meets the eye" (p. 266).

While the distinction between religion and spirituality appears to be one that grew during the end of the 20th century, the trend is clear that such a distinction is firmly in our psychological studies (Pargament, Mahoney, et al., 2013). Where at one time the overlap of the two terms made for one to be seen as the other, there is now a growing acknowledgment that one does not necessarily mean the other. There are a variety of ways in which to find the spiritual in life. Besides the institutional versus personal distinction used by William James, intrinsic versus extrinsic religious orientations defined by Gordon Allport have been found to be helpful in marking the differences within religion.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Orientation (Individual and Social)

Among the classic distinctions made in the psychological study of religion and spirituality is that of **intrinsic and extrinsic orientations** (Allport, 1950). The intrinsically oriented person is involved with religion and spirituality in search of personal meaning. The extrinsically oriented person is involved because of the social aspects of religion, such as the norms, expectations, and advantages that religion fulfills. This leads to very different kinds of religious experiences with very different kinds of outcomes (Bergin, 1991). Reviewing years of research, Bergin (1991) reported on the varying outcomes for the varying religious orientations. Psychologically, the intrinsic religious person appears to be more internally directed and looks psychologically healthier. These individuals find religious or spiritual experiences to be personally fulfilling. The extrinsically oriented are looking for external validation and are driven by outside forces. These individuals look quite different from the intrinsic individuals. They are more dogmatic and seem to be helped less by religious or spiritual involvement and show higher anxiety. The intrinsic, religious-oriented individuals have good grades and academic success. The extrinsic have lower grades and are academically challenged.

Newer considerations of personality variables acknowledge the historical contributions of this internal versus external orientation research to our exploration of the religious experience. For example, Ryan, Rigby, and King (1993) found that those who saw their religious beliefs as a matter of personal choice and not the result of external pressure (they called this **internalization**) were mentally healthy. On the other hand, if the beliefs were conflicted and the result of social pressure (incomplete or **introjected beliefs**), religion and health were negatively related.

One of the newer areas of study is the possibility of religion and spirituality as a basic personality variable in itself. We will consider this area of study next.

ASPIRES (Assessment of Spiritual and Religious Sentiments)

Piedmont and Wilkins (2013) described work examining personality and religion and spirituality. The current five-factor model (FFM) of personality (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) was related to religious and spiritual tendencies. In longitudinal studies of the FFM and these tendencies, agreeableness and conscientiousness seem the best predictors of developing religiosity and spirituality (McCullough, Enders, Brion, & Jain, 2005; Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tracy, 2007). Piedmont and Wilkins (2013) saw these predictions as reasonable, since agreeableness relates to a social focus and conscientiousness means guided by an internal value to do well. Please see Adjustment in Practice: Five-Factor Theory of Personality.

ADJUSTMENT IN PRACTICE
Five-Factor Theory of Personality

Looking at the various ways in which personality can be described, researchers have statistically come to the decision that there are five basic personality dimensions (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987). They have argued that these five dimensions cover all of the variations that occur in human personality—or at least best summarize personality. Factor analysis is the statistical procedure used to come to these five. Therefore, it is called five-factor theory. These factors are made up of the following:

- Openness to experience: Curious, cultured, intelligent
- Conscientiousness: Self-disciplined, hardworking
- Extraversion: Outgoing, enthusiastic, stimulation seeking
- Agreeableness: Nice, socially oriented, in search of harmony with others
- Neuroticism: Anxious, nervous, emotionally unstable

Reflection Questions

1. Do these factors seem to summarize your sense of your own and your friends' personalities?
2. Are there any factors that you feel are missing? If so, explain them and justify your reasoning. If not, explain why you feel these factors are acceptable on their own.

However, they also believed a more thorough explanation of their findings could be obtained by adding a sixth factor to the FFM. Piedmont (2012) derived an Assessment of Spiritual and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale from which a sixth factor might be identified. This additional factor was focused on our **spiritual and religious aspirations**. The components of such a factor would include fulfillment, prayer and meditation (experiencing contentment from prayer and meditative behaviors), transcendence and universality (unity of purpose in life), connectedness (linkage to others), involvement (rituals and other activities), and crises focus (dealing with problems or conflicts with the external forces). There is a growing body of research to support such a sixth factor (Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams, 2009; Piedmont & Leach, 2002; Rican & Janosova, 2010).

This research area attempts to place our religious and spiritual tendencies within the psychological framework of personality. The advantages to this placement are that spirituality and religiousness might be framed within our basic psychological tendencies. Of course, the most basic question is whether this added personality dimension is justifiable from a psychometric viewpoint. Those who have argued for the FFM of personality might point to possible redundancies. Yet research has presented a convincing body of evidence to support the existence of ASPIRES (Piedmont, 2012; Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013). Now we will turn to the effects of religion and spirituality on our mental and physical health.

Effects of Religion and Spirituality on Health

Do religion and spirituality relate to well-being? The simple answer is yes. Being religious and spiritual can have positive effects on one's health (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002; Koenig, 2001; Pargament, 1997, 2002; Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003). There have been findings of a clear reduction of risk of physical illness for churchgoers (Powell et al., 2003), as well as better self-reports on physical health (Boswell, Kahana, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2006). There are positive research findings on efficacy of religious coping when dealing with stress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Arévalo, Prado, & Amaro, 2008; Tix & Frazier, 1998) and with depression (Braxton, Lang, Sales, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2007; Lee, 2007). Religious and spiritual coping are also found to be related to well-being and happiness (Gillium & Ingram, 2006; Lee, 2007).

However, there are two answers to the question of the effects of religion and spirituality on our overall well-being. Kenneth Pargament (2008) stated it best: "It depends" (p. xx). As noted by reviews of studies on religiousness and health (Bergin, 1991; George et al., 2002), the results are mixed: While religion and health can be related, this relationship depends on the specifics of the religion and spirituality within a person's life and his or her ways of

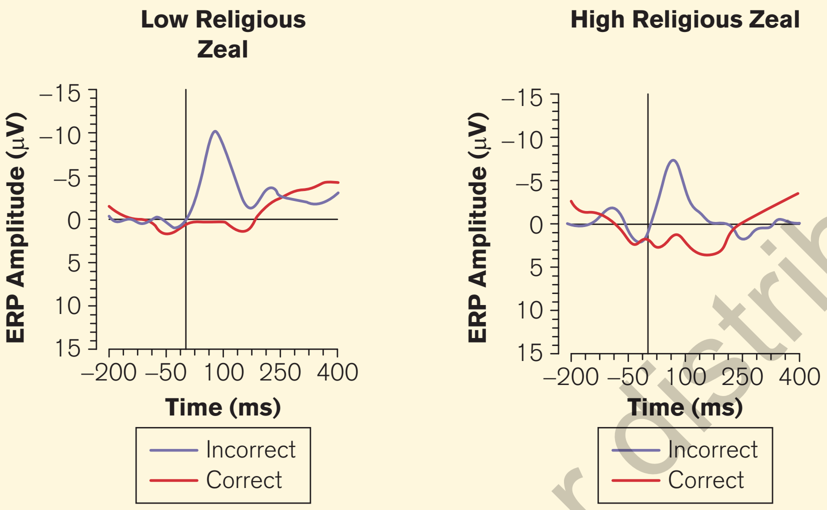
RESEARCHING ADJUSTMENT
Neurological Effects of Religious Belief

In a study of neurological correlates to religious belief, researchers (Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, & Nash, 2009) found differences between religious and nonreligious subjects in the reactivity of the brain area that serves as an alarm bell to signal danger. This area of the brain is called the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The ACC is implicated in both anxiety and self-regulation. When presented with uncertainty or error, the religious were less reactive, meaning they were calmer when faced with challenging conditions.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you find that reflections of a spiritual (here defined as a perspective beyond yourself) or religious nature help to calm you down? Please explain your reasoning.
2. Find a partner, and discuss if he or she feels that spiritual or religious reflection is helpful to him or her. Describe his or her experiences.

Figure 2.2 Relation Between Religious Zeal and Anterior Cingulate Cortex Activity



Neurological alarm reaction in the anterior cingulate cortex is muted in the highly religious.

Source: Figure 1 from Neural Markers of Religious Conviction. Michael Inzlicht, Ian McGregor, Jacob B. Hirsh, and Kyle Nash. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02305.x Psychological Science March 2009 vol. 20 no. 3 385–392.

coping (Pargament, 2008). There is no simple answer to the question of whether religion and spirituality are helpful or harmful, and we are left to wonder what the right answer is. See Researching Adjustment: Neurological Effects on Religious Belief.

Religion, Spirituality, and Meaning

Religion and spirituality can provide a “framework” for life (Pargament, 1997). While Steger and Frazier (2005) found that religiousness and life satisfaction related to each other, it was meaning that mediated over 90% of this relationship. This mediating effect was found for the relationship between religion and optimism and between religion and self-esteem. In a second study, Steger and Frazier (2005) found that religious activity and meaning in life were highly correlated. They believed the effects of religion on well-being could best be explained by religion’s leading to a higher sense of meaning in life.

Such a model fits with others’ findings of religion’s role in meaning making (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). Religious and spiritual frameworks have been found particularly able to withstand events that challenge them (Inzlicht et al., 2009; Park, 2005). This robustness would make such meaning making especially desirable, since explanatory and organizational aids are helpful and play such a vital role in living effectively (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Park, 2005, 2010).

Korotkov (1998) noted the advantages of spiritual and religious systems in that they are comprehensive in nature. In many cases, added to this cognitive appeal are supportive cultural norms and social support networks for such explanatory systems (Krause, 2008). We will explore and discuss the power of such cultural and social contexts in a later chapter. Religion and spirituality are a major meaning-making system around the world and across cultures (Silberman, 2005).

Note on Our Perspective

Our consideration of religion and spirituality is at the level of scientific analysis. This is not meant to be disrespectful to anyone: religious, spiritual, or nonreligious and nonspiritual. Rather, as MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014) reflected on the usefulness of meaning in life, the usefulness of ways to understand life experience is well-demonstrated. What is not demonstrable are assumptions that go into the ways of constructing meaning. This examination of religion and spirituality does not take on the validity of the frameworks or their empirical basis. Rather, what is reported is that in a psychological sense, a spiritual or religious orientation may be helpful. These researchers take William James's position of not engaging in discussions of institutional religion but rather examine the impact of a personal religion on our lives. We are psychologists, not theologians (or at least none of the authors of this text are). What is useful to consider is why religion and spirituality may serve such an important role in the lives of many. The examination of this phenomenon helps to understand the importance of meaning and purpose and of cognitive frameworks to help us, who are thinking beings given the advantage of neural capacities to process large amounts of information from our sensory and social worlds. How we make meaning of the world is a matter of choice.

Autonomy, Choice, and Free Will

Humans like to make their own decisions independent from outside pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2006). There is a research basis to the assertion of the importance of autonomy, free will, and choice, demonstrated in the self-determination theory (SDT).

Engaging in activities that the individual has determined to be reinforcing (intrinsic reinforcement or motivation) leads to more enjoyment and greater persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). In turn, the imposition of externally imposed reinforcers and motivators to an activity can lead to a decrease in the enjoyableness and persistence of that activity. The emphasis in SDT is on the actor feeling free and in control of his or her destiny (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The difference between autonomous (self) motivation and externally controlled motivation is at the basis of their research. Their research has found that when the decision and control of behavior lies with the individual autonomously, performance is superior, persistence is longer, feelings are more positive (fun?), relationships are better, and people report being healthier. Examining the list of advantages, one might surmise that the human being is predisposed to autonomy and the exercise of free choice.

Studies have found that choice feels good (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999), is not mentally taxing (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006), adds a sense of energy or vitality to a person's life (Kasser & Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Frederick, 1997), and is related to feelings of well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). When people worked for intrinsic rewards, they did better than when they work for extrinsically imposed rewards (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Cerasoli and Ford (2014) found that self-mastery goals (to make oneself better) added to self-motivation in producing better performances. When engaged in the pursuit of self-defined goals within self-defined tasks, time seems to go quickly and the completion of tasks can seem effortless, in what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has called the "flow" of life.

Self-determination (choice) versus external pressures determining our actions makes a great difference in the experience of our lives. The importance of our autonomy, our self, and our exercise of free will have been demonstrated in these psychological findings (Ryan & Deci, 2006). See Adjustment in Practice: Creating Choice Conditions.

ADJUSTMENT IN PRACTICE

Creating Choice Conditions

Experimenters have created "choice" conditions and "controlled" conditions though a careful use of language. In choice conditions, participants hear words like *may, could*, or *can*. In control conditions, the words are *should, must*, and *have to*. The phrasing for choice emphasizes the participants deciding to take part: "we ask you to . . . " or "if you choose . . . " versus the more directive control condition phrasing, "you have to . . . " or "you must . . . " or "you had better . . . ." Given these shifts in phrasing, significant differences were found in participants' effort, engagement, and final performances (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Try these differences in language with others.

Reflection Questions

1. How do people react when you vary the emphasis on choice or control? Why do you think they react that way?
2. Which emphasis do you prefer and why?

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined the issues impermanence raise for us. To better deal with these issues, meaning and purpose in one's life can help to assure us of an organized way to deal with the incoming information. A sense of purpose, a coherent worldview, and a sense of commitment are all positive factors in dealing with life.

Religion and spirituality can serve as an effective organizational framework to generate meaning in life. This does not mean it is the only framework, but it is one that is found commonly around the world. Whatever the manner for deriving meaning in our life, from the existential perspective, this is an important step in readying oneself for the challenges to come. And finally, importance of autonomy and choice in the human experience is demonstrated by the "flow" that comes from the exercise of these human qualities. This chapter centers on embracing life and the realization of the human capacities of awareness, creation of meaning, autonomy, and free will.

Review Questions

1. What is existential psychology?
2. What are some of the findings in experimental existential psychology research? How do the findings apply to meaningfulness in life?
3. What is the difference between happiness and meaningfulness?
4. Give an example of purpose in life.
5. What are the components of existential hardiness?
6. What is the importance of spirituality and religion to our considerations of adjustment?

7. Distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic religious orientations. What are the differences in their effects on well-being?
8. What is ASPIRES?
9. Provide an example that is either personal (yourself or someone you know) or in the news regarding the effects of religion and spirituality on health.
10. What research supports the importance of choices in life? How does this fit into the existential framework?

Key Terms

existential psychology 28
hardy individuals 33
impermanence 28
institutional and personal religion 35
internalization 36
intrinsic and extrinsic orientations 36
introjected beliefs 36
purpose in life 28
religion 28
sense of coherence 32
spiritual and religious aspirations 37
spirituality 28
terror management theory 30

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