FROM SUFFERING TO FLOURISHING: THE TRANSFORMATIONAL EFFECTS OF FINDING MEANING AND SPIRITUAL STRIVING IN OVERCOMING ADDICTION

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ABSTRACT

Using data derived from a questionnaire study of 68 alcoholics, the current research examined differences in three spheres of quality of life (QoL) of these adults before they entered treatment to a point two years after being discharged. Results showed the magnitude of overall QoL improvement was significantly and positively correlated with the amount of meaning that respondents perceived to be present in their life at the point of two year follow-up. In the sample as a whole, the total score on the QoL scale was not related to whether or not respondents indicated they were striving for spiritual goals. Spiritual striving, however, was found to moderate the strength of the association between meaning in life and QoL for one of the three spheres of QoL. Specifically, among the 26 individuals who did not see themselves as being a ‘spiritual seeker’ meaning in life was unrelated to the quality of community functioning (‘societal’ wellbeing). When a matched sample of 26 spiritual seekers was examined, QoL was found to be significantly and positive related to personal (hedonic) wellbeing; interpersonal wellbeing and (adaptive) functioning in society. Findings of the present study are consistent with the suggestion made by Frankl and others who proposed that suffering can be a catalyst for a more fulfilling way of being – provided that people are able to see meaning and purpose in that suffering. The apparent adaptive consequences of perceived meaning were rather widespread among the spiritual seekers who may have experienced a sanctified sense of meaning. Based on this possibility, we propose a Broad Spectrum Model to describe the more generalized salutary effects of sacred (as opposed to secular) meaning.

Introduction

Why doesn't everyone buckle and deteriorate when they experience powerful negative emotions that come from having sustained serious harm? Following in the tradition pioneered by Antonovsky (1987), a small but growing cadre of scholars and health care practitioners have begun to unravel the mystery of why some people decompensate in these kinds of situations while others flourish. Knowledge in this rapidly emerging field of subspecialization has been summarized by Joseph & Linley (2008) in their edited book “Trauma, recovery and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress” (see also Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

In the present study, we adopted a resilience-resource (RR) model that suggested existen-
tial and spiritual factors may play a salutogenic role in affecting long-term changes in the quality of life (QoL) of adults who had hit rock bottom due to chronic alcoholism and who had received professional treatment. The specific RR factors of interest to our research included the ability to find meaning to be present in life (Frankl, 1967) and ‘spiritual striving’ toward sacred goals (Emmons, 1999, 2005). Prior research along this general trajectory suggests the benefits of treatment on substance abuse and psychological and social wellbeing may be moderated by factors that are existential and spiritual in nature (eg., Chen, 2006; Carroll, 1993; Kish & Moody (2006); Laudet et al., 2006; Piderman et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2007, Waisberg & Porter, 1994).

Our review of the literature revealed no studies designed to test whether or not recovering alcoholics who are able to find meaning in their life and who are striving for sacred goals might experience positive transformation and change in terms of improved quality of life that is sustained during the post-treatment (aftercare) phase of recovery. Using data derived from a questionnaire study of 68 alcoholics, the current research examined differences over time in three spheres of quality of life (QoL) of these adults. The differences we were interested in exploring consisted of QoL before entering treatment to QoL at a point two years after being discharged.

Three predictions were tested: Hypothesis 1: meaning in life would be positively related to amount of improvement in QoL. Hypothesis 2: recovering alcoholics who see themselves as pursuing spiritual (sacred) goals (Emmons, 2008) would improve more on QoL than their secular counterparts. Hypothesis 3: The perceived presence of meaning in life will interact with spiritual seeking status such that seekers who find high levels of meaning will have higher QoL than non-seekers who find high levels of meaning. In other words, the expected positive association between meaning making and QoL will be far stronger in the seeker subgroup than the non seeker subgroup.

**Method**

**Respondents.** Sixty-eight participants were contacted approximately 2.2 years subsequent to completing an inpatient alcoholism treatment program at a Minnesota Model treatment center in England. The program emphasized total abstinence from alcohol, spirituality, and involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous.

**Focus on Dynamic Change.** A mailed questionnaire asked participants to provide ratings of their current level of functioning (2 yrs after discharge) relative to their functioning prior to treatment entry. This ‘comparison’ procedure yielded retrospective perceptions of the degree of change (improvement) over time on the primary outcome measure, which was quality of life (QoL).

**Outcome Variable: Improved Quality of Life (QoL).** We developed a 26-item “Three Domain Index of QoL” (TDI-QoL). This index was based on the holistic definition of “recovery” from alcoholism that was developed by the Betty Ford Institute Consensus Panel report (2007). Our TDI-QoL also mapped onto many of the constructs featured in theories of optimal functioning (eudaimonic

The TDI-QoL provided a discrepancy score which compared respondents level of life functioning at the point of treatment intake (Time1) to their functioning at the point of study followup (Time 2). Thus, the primary outcome variables examined in the current research consisted of improvement in QoL in each of the following three life domains: ‘Personal Functioning’ (9 items tapping 4 subtypes: emotional, life satisfaction, and alcohol use); ‘Interpersonal Functioning’ (7 items all tapping relational wellness); and ‘Societal Functioning’ (11 items tapping 5 subtypes: legal/criminal, work/job, utilization of health care system).

**Predictor and Moderator Variables.**

The predictor variable consisted of a measure that tapped the perceived presence of meaning in life. The moderating variable consisted of a respondent’s status as a spiritual striver (either ‘yes’ or ‘no’). **Perceived Availability of Meaning (PAM).** We assessed the presence of meaning in life using a single item scale that provided quantity ratings of level of perceived meaning/purpose in life along a seven point rating scale. Participants responded to the following question: “To what extent do you agree that your life really does have meaning and purpose?” (6 = could not agree more strongly; 0 = Could not disagree more strongly). **Spiritual Striving (SS).** A respondents status as a spiritual striver was assessed using the following single item index: “Would you say you are the type of spiritual seeker who thirsts to have greater conscious contact with the ‘God’ of your understanding?” Respondents were classified as strivers if they answered “Yes” and non-striv-

A t-test indicated that spiritual seekers did not have higher levels of PAM than their non-spiritual seeking counterparts (t = -1.02, ns). The Spearman’s rho correlation relating PAM and SS was r = .16, ns.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that, in the sample as a whole (n = 68), PAM would be positively related to QoL scores using the Total QoL score. This expectation was confirmed (r = .38, p < .01). Analyses of the three QoL subscales showed PAM was related to personal functioning (PF, r = .41, p < .001), interpersonal functioning (IF, r = .26, p < .05) and societal functioning (SF, r = .24, p < .05).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that spiritual strivers (n = 48) would have higher QoL scores that their non-spiritual striving counterparts (n = 26). A t-test that compared QoL scores of the two groups disconfirmed this expectation (t = .59, ns). Similarly, Spearman’s rho correlations showed seeking status was unrelated to the Total QoL score (r = -.08, ns) and to the PF, IF and SF subscales (r = -.06, ns, r = -.04, ns, r = -.07, ns, respectively).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that a person’s status as a spiritual seeker would affect the strength of the associations connecting MIL to QoL. Results provide qualified support for this expectation, inasmuch as the moderating effect appeared to be limited to the societal functioning (SF) QoL subscale. In the analyses
that follow, we matched the sample size of 26 non spiritual seekers by randomly selecting a sub-sample of 26 spiritual strivers from the larger population of 48. Examining first the 26 spiritual seekers, results showed PAM was positively related to the total QoL score \( (r = .57, p < .001) \); personal functioning (PF, \( r = .49, p < .01 \)), interpersonal functioning (IF, \( r = .29, p \ ns \)) and societal functioning (SF, \( r = .41, p < .01 \)). Within the subsample who did not identify themselves as being a spiritual seeker, results were similar except for societal functioning. PAM was positively related to the Total QoL score \( (r = .30, ns) \), personal functioning (PF, \( r = .50, p < .01 \)) and interpersonal functioning (IF, \( r = .31, ns \)). However, in marked contrast to the .41 coefficient that was found for the spiritual seekers, PAM was not at all related to societal functioning (SF, \( r = -.02, ns \)).

Discussion

Existential psychology is concerned with understanding how people struggle with the human predicament. In the current study, we examined a group of 68 adults who had all experienced a crisis in their life which provided a potential opportunity to embark on a journey of life transformation. From the midst of their initial suffering to a point two years after being discharged from treatment, some of these adults fared better than others in terms of being able to take advantage of this turning point for purposes of improving themselves and their lives.

Consistent with the results of quality of life (QoL) research addressing how people struggle with the hardships associated with cancer and heart disease (Schoen & Nicolas, 2004; Park et al., 2008) our findings suggest that the process of ‘recovering’ a high QoL in the context of treatment for alcoholism may be facilitated by finding meaning to be present in one’s life.

Findings of the present study are consistent with the theoretical model by Frankl and other existential thinkers, practitioners and researchers who have observed that suffering in life can be a catalyst for a more fulfilling way of being – provided that people are able to see meaning and purpose in that suffering. In the current study, the apparent adaptive life consequences of finding meaning in life were rather widespread among the spiritual seekers. Of possible special significance are results suggesting the possibility that benefits to the community/society of finding meaning during long term recovery from alcoholism may not be forthcoming when individuals are not pursuing spiritual goals.

For the secular subgroup, the benefits of finding meaning were limited to improved personal and interpersonal wellbeing. Unlike their secular counterparts, the spiritual seekers in the current study may have experienced a sanctified sense of meaning. Based on this possibility, we propose a Broad Spectrum Model to describe the more generalized salutary life consequences of sacred (as opposed to secular) meaning in the context of overcoming the hardship of alcoholism.