

Meaningful existence

How we as coaches can promote connected, pro-social, pro-environmental lifestyles

Part
Six



By Lizzi Larbalestier

We confuse meaning with being a goal, creating awareness of a gap between here and there

WHAT

GIVES

YOU

MEANING?

In this article we will explore why *connecting with* and *envisioning* a wider sense of meaning is so important, what gets in the way of this, and how we as coaches can approach this with our clients. Previous articles have worked through logical levels and we now find ourselves in the domain of: purpose, vision, mission, teleology, spirituality – all these words and more have been used for the logical level beyond identity... but for now I would like to work with 'sense of meaning' as the label.

Many of our coaching clients arrive having questions such as: why am I here, and what is this all for? A search for happiness and a sense of disconnection from purpose is after all one of the major reasons people employ coaches.

So, a question to start with:

What is the sense of meaning you are enacting and evolving within your life right now... the 'significance' that you are currently living and breathing?

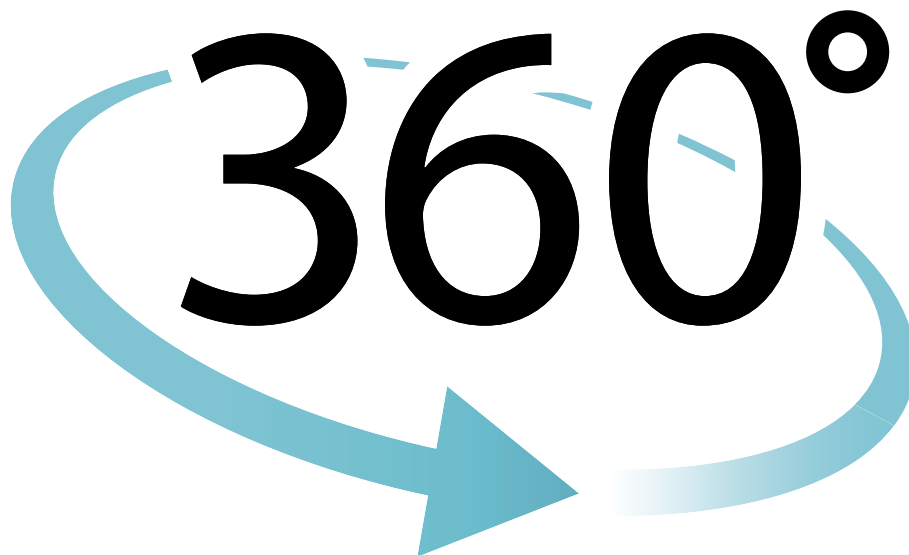
Take a moment to really contemplate this for yourself – a 360° scan of your lifestyle to include professional and social activities.

An odd question... but when we consider 'meaning' as an ongoing process then we already become more deeply connected to the paths we are taking.

To answer this question with any real depth requires that we not only create some form of definition of what *being meaningful* might mean to us, but also that we seek out and identify all the places meaning might already currently exist within our lifestyle.

A tricky challenge, since we tend to approach 'finding meaning' in a dissociated manner as if 'it is out there somewhere'.

We confuse meaning with being a goal, creating awareness of a gap between here and there. Typically we might nominalise our goals, so that we can break them down into manageable chunks or milestones starting with, for example, 'I wish to be a great leader', or 'I aim to have a successful business' and then making step-by-step plans towards these.



Of course there is a place for performance coaching and a meaningful life includes goals... but we can as coaches inadvertently perpetuate an idea of living life in a way that suggests we are at A and heading to B and the best way to approach this is the fastest, most efficient route.

Meaningful living, however, is not a destination; instead it is something that has every potential to be ubiquitous in our lives.

Think of your past five or ten years – use a timeline if you like and play with exploring truly meaningful moments. As NLP professionals you will know that it's fine to step into the positive memories, reliving them and reigniting those resources, whereas those 'less than ideal' times are best viewed dissociated.


What were the moments you selected, and why those moments; what made them meaningful? It is likely that they were charged with emotion, for sure – after all that is how anchors are created... right?

In fact scientific research has shown that we are predisposed to apportion meaning to extremities of affect rather than noticing

incremental meaningful moments that exist day to day. Less surprisingly, there is a dominance for positive over negative affect when reflecting upon experiences we would describe as 'meaningful'.

So perhaps a better question to ask is, what were the emotions that brought meaning to these moments for you? Maybe you chose pivotal moments of achievement or times filled with satisfaction of some sort, such as feelings of love, inspiration, awe etc.

Now stand back from your timeline and notice the interrelationships between each of the moments you chose and explore how widespread the meaning is – ie are the peaks and troughs so very pronounced as you imagined or is 'meaning' a little more distilled within your life so far?

It is useful to acknowledge that there is a lack of consistency in how 'meaning' is defined. We can approach this using clean questions to encourage clients to discover their own models. Or, for the purpose of this article let's play with some constructs for 

WHAT IS YOUR WHY?



**Meaning and happiness
are not the same thing**

► 'meaning' in order to inform a practical coaching approach.

When we ask our clients to describe meaningful moments they often hear this as an invitation to share happy moments. Three points to note are:

- Meaning is much broader than a moment. It spans time; we want to know that our past, our right now, and our future matter.
- Meaning and happiness are not the same thing.
 - *Happiness is associated with projects that are likely to be successful and links to personal benefit.*
 - *Meaning is more associated with projects that are personally expressive and pro-social.*
- Meaning and satisfaction are not necessarily co-dependent. In fact, despite the skew towards attributing meaning within positive experiences, it is, of course, completely possible to derive significant meaning from experiences that are not so enjoyable.
- Meaning does, however, have an impact on wellbeing (and vice versa), and as coaches it can be helpful to distinguish two types of wellbeing if we are seeking to enable our clients to vibrate at a higher level instead of living in a world of peaks and troughs.
- Hedonic wellbeing (HWB) is all about frequent pleasure and the attainment of needs, goals and desires combined with the infrequency of displeasure – we might describe this as a high level of subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction.
- Eudaimonic wellbeing (EWB) focuses on self-discovery, personal growth, and the fulfilment of our true potential; this type of wellbeing also tends to link to having collective goals that have wider social aims. Having direction and pursuing excellence are likely to give the perception that our life is meaningful, that it has a purpose.

Meaning lies where we choose to invest our energy

Why does this matter? Well, when we think of these distinctions it is likely that our clients do not necessarily really connect with how much meaning there already is within their lives. Studies have shown that those who reported themselves as 'seeking meaning' were less satisfied with life than those who described their day-to-day activities as 'having meaning' – spending their time learning, creating or helping others for instance; participating in activities not to pursue meaning but because the activities in themselves were good.

Take yourself back to the timeline – an example moment might be gaining an award or climbing a mountain. Whilst the HWB might be seen as a peak moment, the EWB and much of the broader meaning will have been gained in the learning, the struggle, the problem solving, the shared pride and so on; it will span from the initial idea out through the ripple effect of the single moment and it will have permeated other areas of your life... it is not constrained to a date and time.

So – let's answer the questions I started with...

Why is it important to connect with and envision a wider sense of meaning?

Meaning lies where we choose to invest our energy; without a connection to meaning we are semi-conscious. Questions such as 'What would you do if you had a year to live?' can be helpful as a wake-up call. They ask us to contemplate our non-existence as a way of both contrasting and connecting with what it means to be alive. As coaches our role is to motivate and support the





direction of energy. Recognising that meaning already exists in our lifestyles makes it more accessible and increases life satisfaction. An absence of meaning can have negative mental health consequences, whereas a focus on pro-social action helps individuals and communities to thrive.

What gets in the way?

We are busy being busy, conditioned in our thinking and we ask the wrong questions without taking time to denormalise 'meaning'. Our wellbeing pursuits can fail to acknowledge the value of balancing HWB and EWB, resulting in a lack of true connection.

So how can we as coaches address this?

We can help our clients to discover all the areas in which meaning already lies, chunking down to:

- Motivational components – activities which intrinsically have a sense of purpose. We experience meaning when our life and activities are *directed towards* important aims.
- Affective components – valued contributions; the ripple effect of simply showing up. We have meaning when we feel our existence has *significance* beyond the immediate or present moment.
- Cognitive components – the things that we are compelled to do because they are obviously the right choice. We experience meaning and coherence when life *makes sense* to us; we don't need to overthink.

Chunk back up to discover what the insights raised say about

the client as a person, and explore how these can be built upon to further expand their 'life worth living'.

Encourage them to find causes to support during their free time – even small actions make a difference: climate change, the education system, caring for the elderly, health provision, economic development, domestic violence, social inclusion and many more... there are plenty of options. What will make them feel and know they are making a difference? These types of projects also provide opportunity to surround themselves with like-minded people – a shared purpose brings even more meaning.

Passion is neither the result of action nor the cause of it... it is both!

Map HWB and EWB with them in a creative way, perhaps comparing sub-modalities of differing experiences and using this as a discussion starter to explore balance – without even mentioning 'meaning' but creating a more coherent and aware approach to spending time in each domain.

Find out what they are called to do. Ask them what are the activities they become so absorbed in that they lose track of time completely. Even if they come back with something that appears on the surface not hugely progressive, use this as a discussion starter about what exactly calls them to invest their time in this way. Acknowledge their ability to be fully immersed in an activity – this ability is a resource.

So, in summary: rather than head off on a search for meaning, translate it, acknowledge where it already exists, and address imbalances to encourage healthy play, curiosity and the living of a meaningful life day to day. ■

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