

PURPOSE AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

— Bob Murray & Alicia Fortinberry

Intuitively, most of us search for a purpose, a sense that we are here for a reason, and that our individual existence matters. Often we humans don't even know what we're looking for, or how to go about finding our life purpose. Many of our depressed and troubled clients and students and even our highly successful executive coaching clients tell us that that they feel "lost" and "adrift" and question the value of their lives. We find that discovering and pursuing a life purpose plays a significant role in our clients' well-being and recovery from depression and other disorders.

Much research supports the need for a sense of purpose: most recently, UCLA's Julienne Bower and others have shown that even the effective functioning of our immune system depends on a sense of purpose. Organizational psychologists point out that a shared sense of purpose is vital to employees' well-being.

A need for a sense of purpose seems built in to the human psyche. Studies of recent and past hunter-gatherer societies indicate that our ancestors' lives were full of meaning and purpose. Scholars such as Anthony Stevens and John Price (in *Evolutionary Psychiatry*, Routledge, 2000) note that hunter-gatherers didn't suffer from long-lasting mood disorders.

In our modern society, we seem to have lost intrinsic meaning and purpose, and even to be confused about what it means to be purposeful. What is the difference between a set of goals and a "life purpose?" What are the characteristics that a life purpose must have in order to be functional in a therapeutic con-

text? How can we help our clients discover their life purpose?

It seems to us that the first thing we need to do is to differentiate goals from purpose. We are taught from early childhood to be "goal-driven"—to pass exams, get into the right college, find the right job or profession, strive for promotion, the perfect house, car, or partner, to bring up our children properly. None of these goals are lasting; none fit the totality of who we are.

According to the extensive research of Professor Stephen Reiss of Ohio State University, we tend to strive for the wrong kind of happiness. "Value-based happiness is a sense that our lives have meaning and fulfill some larger purpose," he wrote in "Secrets of Happiness" (*Psychology Today*, Jan./Feb. 2001). "It represents a spiritual source of satisfaction, stemming from our deeper purpose and values." Reiss contrasts value happiness with the more transient, hedonistic "feel-good happiness," which comes from pursuing short-term rewards such as material goods, career advancement, and sex. This kind of pleasure-seeking tends to demand more and more of the same to have ongoing effect, and can, outside the context of a supportive relationship nexus, actually engender depression. The false values of our dysfunctional modern society are, in fact, at the root of today's mental health crisis.

How can therapists appropriately assist clients in finding and pursuing this potent healing mechanism? In our experience, a functional and therapeutic life purpose contributes to value happiness by meeting the following criteria:

1. **Altruistic.** We get satisfaction from doing things that benefit others, and the closer those people are to us, the more intense the satisfaction we get.
2. **Communal.** As social animals, our mental and physical health depends on sharing our purpose with others.
3. **Survives us.** A lasting purpose is not achievable within one lifetime.
4. **Achievable.** Short-, medium-, and long-term goals advance our overall mission.

ALTRUISTIC VALUES

Humans are by nature altruistic, and the desire to do good for others lies at the heart of a therapeutic sense of purpose. We get a strong neurochemical reward from contributing to the well-being of others. Research has shown that those who devote themselves to helping others live longer and are, overall, healthier than those who are selfish.

Altruism is built into our genes and, as bio-psychologist Bjørn Grinde points out in his book *Darwinian Happiness* (Darwin Press, 2002), we feel happier and less depressed when we live the way our genetics intended. Grinde and other leading researchers dispute Richard Dawkins' rather pessimistic and narrow view of altruism. The instinct to cooperate and aid others is broader, they say, than just our genes' desire to perpetuate themselves by making us willing to sacrifice ourselves for those genetically closest to us. The narrow interpretation of the selfish gene hypothesis would hardly explain our devotion to saving animals, or the environment. (Compared to a close human

relative, a mongrel terrier, or a tree, shares relatively little of an individual's DNA and yet PETA and the Audubon Society are two of the richest charities in the U.S.).

The evolutionary benefit of a wider altruism can be seen in the idea of "indirect reciprocity." This theory holds that if you help one person, someone else will help you. In theological terms, you may be rewarded by God. In human terms, you may receive the recognition of your peers for your selfless act, which improves your status and reputation. Acknowledgement of our altruism and virtue leads to an increase in what Professor Paul Gilbert calls our "social attention holding power" (or SAHP)—our worth within the community or our assumption of that worth—and to an increase in our level of self-esteem.

Of course, altruism often lies in the eyes of the beholder. Bin Laden probably believes that his cause—his life purpose—will benefit humankind and that those killed on 9/11 or more recently in London or Iraq were necessary sacrifices to the greater good. However, as psychotherapists it is not our role to judge what is and what is not really altruistic, only to invite clients to seek out causes that speak to them.

IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS

In the close-knit hunter-gatherer band, almost all activities are done communally and for a common purpose—ultimately, the survival of the band. So fundamental to our health and happiness is the enduring support and safety of our close relationships that our greatest fear is of social exclusion. In hunter-gatherer groups, an individual's exclusion from the protection of the band means almost certain death. However, in a highly stressed and fragmented society, emotional trauma or mental illness can blunt the drive to create functional, supportive relationships.

Shared purpose is a potent force for uniting people and is essential to forming cohesive social groupings. Purpose is what defines both a society—tribe, family, organization, or nation—and the individuals within it. Unfortunately, our society has become too large and amorphous to inspire the devotion of its members or provide concrete and rewarding ways to pursue a meaningful purpose.

People turn to smaller and more manageable groups such as charities, politics, churches, or even cults, who can provide them with a sense of vision and community. When a group is united by a common cause, it becomes the equivalent of the hunter-gatherer band, which in turn endows most members with a double sense of purpose—the original mission and the survival of the band.

The motivating power of communal purpose is an extremely valuable tool in the healing of disorders such as depression. Indeed, studies show that those who join an organization which has a clear mission can become intensely loyal to it and will vehemently defend its doctrines—even if they don't actually believe in them.

The fear of ostracism can keep people in a dysfunctional or abusive situation, whether it be a corporation or a cult. When encouraging clients to find or create a nurturing and purposeful community, a therapist should guide them to select a group that rewards and values its members. Professor Peter Warr of the Institute of Work Psychology identifies several criteria which give an individual a sense of belonging within a functional organization, workplace, or group. These are:

1. Autonomy—Members must feel they have a sense of personal control within the group and are not just a cog in the wheel.
2. The opportunity to exercise skills
3. A variety of challenging tasks
4. Respect and status
5. A high level of interpersonal

contact

6. A clear and concrete understanding of what the group requires of members

A PURPOSE FOR LIFE

The healing nature of a functional life purpose lies ultimately in its permanence. For hunter-gatherers, the safety and security of the band serves as a buffer against transient stresses and loss. Our craving for stability and continuity can be assuaged by a sense of ongoing purpose. A lifelong purpose can help us deal with loss by putting it in the context of a greater something that gives us meaning and which we can rely upon to always be there.

Given our education and upbringing, it's hard for modern humans to come to grips with the notion that the usual priorities—principally career-building and child-rearing—are transitory. The goals we strive for at home and at work, and the community we form around these goals, inevitably come to an end. We experience multiple endings over the course of our lives because of events such as maternal separation, graduating from school, divorce, unemployment, children growing up and leaving home, retirement, and death and relocation of friends and loved ones. Such endings can result in a deep sense of loss, depression, and even suicide.

We fear the loss of physical or mental function, of an attachment figure or loved one, of control or autonomy, and of status. Fear of loss is second only to the fear of exclusion, and often, as when retirement separates us from our work tribe, these losses come devastatingly together.

The loss of a goal in which an individual has invested his entire sense of identity and purpose can be especially traumatic—even if the loss is the result of success in achieving the goal. Jim was a CEO of a major corporation who had fought vigorously over many years to bring his company from near

insolvency to being a Fortune 500 blockbuster. All through this time, he was in high spirits, and the depression he had experienced in his early 20s had vanished.

Finally his corporation became the subject of a takeover by an even more powerful monolith. It was a triumph, and Jim stood to make a very large fortune. But shortly after the deal was done, the old depression returned. "I feel empty," he told Bob. "My life no longer has meaning." The loss of the transitory career goal had been huge, and he had nothing—no greater life purpose—to fall back on. With Bob's help, Jim was able to rebuild a more robust sense of self, independent of achievement goals, by exploring deeper values and kindling relationships with people who shared his new sense of purpose. With renewed optimism and a commitment to helping others, Jim founded an organization dedicated to empowering disadvantaged young people by teaching them financial and entrepreneurial skills.

SHORT-TERM GOALS AND LONG-TERM PURPOSE

Although a purpose should outlast us, we need way-points to give us a sense of achievement and prevent discouragement and even depression.

You can help your clients start their journey to a fulfilling sense of purpose—and stay on track—by suggesting they chunk down their life mission into doable short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

If your client's search for purpose involves belonging to an organization, you might help him or her explore whether the groups' short- and long-term goals are in line with his or her abilities and desires. Clear communication, negotiation, and agreement around the needs and expectations of each individual and the group as a whole are essential.

PLANNING FOR PURPOSE

Clients and students who attend our Uplift Program or corporate workshops often ask: "I want more meaning in my life, but exactly how do I discover my true purpose?" or "I have an idea of what my life purpose is, but how do I go about putting it into practice?"

There are six actions you and your clients can take to help them find and advance their unique sense of purpose:

1. Work out an overall purpose. A good start is to ask your client what aspects of society he or she is really angry about and would most like to change. People usually come up with quite a few ideas before alighting on one that is a good fit. This need not be their final choice as a life purpose is bound to change and/or develop over time. Most general purposes are ongoing, and all should involve the common good: "save the rainforest," "rid the world of poverty," "end child pornography."

2. Define the mission in concrete terms. Let's say that the client's overall purpose is to rid the world of poverty. Ask what it would look like if this goal was achieved. Perhaps "everyone in the world would have three good meals a day and a dry and safe place to live in." As the mission is clarified, it also becomes more obvious what steps he or she can take toward achieving it.

3. Set short-term goals. An example here might be: "I will investigate the extent of poverty in my county." Without these short-term "doing" goals, your client will probably never start out on the quest.

4. Give tasks a timeline. This will mean concretizing the immediate goals a bit more so that time frames for their achievement can be set as follows:

Short term task: Research poverty statistics in my city

Timeline: Begin today

Short-term task: Contact local anti-poverty groups

Timeline: Begin tomorrow

Short-term task: Plan how much time per week I can allot to this project

Timeline: Saturday

5. Stick to the targets. Encouraging your client to set realistic targets and stick to the timeline is important because the behavioral patterns underlying many problems—especially mood disorders—will tend toward procrastination and lack of achievement. Ongoing revision and additional tasks will of course be needed as the plan is put into practice and evolves.

6. Find other groups or individuals who share part or all of your purpose. Joining with others can be done at any stage. The more your client shares his or her purpose with friends, colleagues, and family (not necessarily family of origin), the stronger his or her relationships will become.

To a hunter-gatherer, purpose is intrinsic and simple. It is the sense that you—along with all the members of your tribe—contribute meaningfully to the preservation of your band. Everything you achieve is a step toward the fulfillment of that never-ending purpose. We and our clients must often recreate a sense of meaning and purpose from scratch, just as we must create or search out a band of like-minded people to share it with. At stake is our emotional, physical, and perhaps spiritual health.

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