

'Meaning in life' may be at heart of wellness

March 4 2016, by Paul Mayne

A recent Western study into positive psychological factors, like a strong sense of meaning in one's life, may unlock a new method of enhancing mental health and well-being for adults and seniors.

Research by clinical psychologist Marnin Heisel recently explored the relationship between perceived meaning in life, reasons for living and thoughts of suicide in seniors. He found [older adults](#) who have increased identification of reasons for living, in turn, significantly decreased the likelihood of contemplating suicide. Heisel's study appears in the journal *Aging & Mental Health*.

"The main purpose was to ask the question what promotes mental health and well-being among older adults. What might prevent them from starting to struggle with depression and contemplate suicide over time?" asked Heisel, a Lawson Health Research Institute scientist whose research focuses on the assessment and treatment of depression and suicide risk among older adults. "The people who report more meaning in life tend to be protected against depressive symptoms or thoughts of suicide, even taking into consideration losses, struggles and challenges they experience.

"Could it be 'meaning in life' actually mediates the association between reasons for living and suicide? My sense was the two should be strongly associated with each other. We found it was the case. It really seems to provide the link between reasons people give for living and not contemplating suicide – they are engaging in a deeper sense in meaning."

Heisel interviewed 109 community-residing adults, over the age of 65, assessing each for thoughts of suicide, perceptions of the meaning in life and reasons for living. In his study, 'meaning in life' refers to the sense that one's life has a deeper significance, while 'reasons for living' refers to individual examples of those things that make life worthwhile.

The study found individuals who report more reasons for living are far less likely to contemplate suicide, as are individuals who report a strong sense of meaning in life. Older adults who find meaning in life were also much more likely to identify reasons for living.

"Our findings suggest that by experiencing a deeper sense of meaning in life, individuals identify strong and multiple reasons for living," Heisel said. "It appears that meaning in life mediates a relationship where stronger identification of reasons for living leads to decreased chances of suicide contemplation."

Heisel's findings support a growing exploration of positive psychological factors that may help to enhance mental health and well-being while preventing the development of depression and thoughts of suicide. According to the World Health Organization, someone around the globe commits suicide every 40 seconds. In Canada, 4,000 people die by suicide every year, with men over the age of 65 most at risk.

"We need to continue studying positive psychological factors and their effects," Heisel said. "Rather than focusing solely on the treatment of a mental disorder, like depression, we need to assess and enhance positive [psychological factors](#), like meaning in life and reasons for living. This will help us to enhance mental health and wellbeing for adults and seniors, and may help reduce the need for formal mental health-care services."

Heisel added, as a society, we don't have a clearly defined role for older

adults, perhaps leading them to feel they no longer have a contribution to make or have a role, leading them to feel they are not useful anymore and a burden to others.

"It's important we provide for older adults," he said. "Along with evaluating struggles and [mental-health](#) issues, we also need to focus on positive factors, what helps keep them going even when struggling? Why don't we try to develop an intervention that can enhance their sense of meaning in life, try to orient them to things that are meaningful, whether in terms of work, activities, relationships or interests?"

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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