

Abstract ESPMH 2018

Narrative meaning making and integration of falling ill: Reconstruction of Life Events (RE-LIFE)

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Falling seriously ill may conflict with peoples' goals and expectations, triggering existential questions about the cause of the event and the meaning for one's life. In psychology and (health) sociology, research has been performed on the way people restore meaning and adapt to their new situation after stressful life events, influencing the quality of life they experience.

Combining theories of contingency and narrative identity, we propose a humanities approach, emphasizing the crisis of meaning people may experience when confronted with the 'randomness of life', which requires narrative reconstruction. Following the philosopher Kurt Wuchterl, falling ill is considered a *contingent* life event: something that befalls people but could also have been otherwise. The word contingent means 'something that is neither necessary nor impossible', referring to the idea that everything, including one's own life, could have been different.

If falling seriously ill conflicts with people's ultimate life goals and worldview, it may lead to a so-called 'experience of contingency': a crisis of meaning, caused by the disruption of the person's life narrative. Trying to make sense of such events, people may engage in a process of narrative meaning making: configuring separate events into a meaningful whole.

Eventually, this may lead to integration of the event in the life story to a greater or lesser extent, changing peoples' life narrative and consequently their narrative identity.

We distinguish between four 'modes' of narrative integration: 1) denying, in which the contingency and/or existential relevance of the event is ignored or reasoned away; 2) acknowledging, in which the contingency and existential relevance of the event are acknowledged; 3) accepting, in which the new reality that comes with the consequences is accepted and the event is re-interpreted; 4) receiving, in which new possibilities are embraced and the integration of the event in the life narrative is completed. In this mode the event is given a meaningful place without disregarding its contingency and disruptive meaning.

To enable the empirical testing of the theoretical model described above, the Reconstruction of Life Events (RE-LIFE) Questionnaire was developed operationalizing the concepts worldview, ultimate life goals, experience of contingency, narrative meaning making, narrative integration and quality of life. The questionnaire was completed by 249 cardiac patients, three and six months after revascularization.

Classical test theory and factor analyses were used to analyze its psychometric characteristics. The following theoretical distinctions were confirmed: 'Influence of life event

on ultimate life goals', 'Importance of ultimate life goals' and 'Experience of contingency'. For 'Worldview', the sub-concepts 'absolute immanence' and 'transcendence' were found. For 'Narrative integration', we found three 'modes' instead of the hypothesized four. The questions related to 'Narrative meaning making' need further examination.

At the conference, the results will be presented with respect to the theoretical distinctions and the hypothesized relationships among the concepts and with criterion measures such as health-related quality of life.

Dependent on these results, the RE-LIFE Questionnaire may be used in research to improve our understanding of the relationships among worldview, ultimate life goals, and narrative meaning making and integration of life events.