Chapter 4
Meaning as a Buffer for Existential Anxiety

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Human life is spent in a densely woven web of meanings—meanings big and small. It is virtually impossible for us to imagine life without meaning, and when we do, it tends to resemble either utter chaos or vast emptiness. We need and want meaning. Although meaning does a variety of things for people, this chapter will focus on the function of meaning as an existential anxiety buffer. We will argue that the relentless human search for meaning is motivated, to a significant extent, by awareness of mortality, and that meaning can assuage the potential terror born from this awareness. We start with a discussion of what meaning is, after which we examine how meaning at different levels of abstraction helps people deal with the unsettling knowledge of their own mortality.

The Different Meanings of Meaning

At the core of the definition of meaning is that it connects things (Baumeister 1991; Baumeister and Vohs 2002). It is important to distinguish between two types of meaning, both of which entail the idea of connection, albeit at different levels of abstraction. One revolves around the notion of comprehensibility—around detecting and expecting certain patterns, associations, and invariants. This is the kind of meaning where we know and expect rain to be wet, Sunday to follow Saturday, or the word "no" to indicate negation in English. Meaning, in this

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micro sense, is "ubiquitous and effortless" (King 2012)—our everyday lives are filled with such simple, local meanings, and things automatically make sense to us most of the time. This is as it should be, because in order to be able to move effectively through life we need ways to understand how things are related to each other in space and time, and most importantly, in terms of cause and effect (Heider 1958). Our brain and senses seem to be evolutionarily wired for expecting and enjoying patterns. The experience that stimuli make sense elicits mild positive affect (Topolinski et al. 2009; Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). Even 5 month old infants look longer at events that do not make sense from a physical point of view (Baillargeon et al. 1985), presumably in an attempt to better comprehend them. The desire to 'connect the dots' and create meaning is so strong that it can lead people to see meaningful patterns in meaningless noise (Shermer 2011). Perceptions of expected associations that have been violated, in contrast, prompt attempts to restore meaning through a wide array of compensatory strategies (Heine et al. 2006).

The second type of meaning, often known as "capital-M-meaning" (e.g., Mascaro et al. 2004), involves questions of significance and worth, and explorations of how something fits with larger systems of value and meaning. When people contemplate the meaning of life in general and their life in particular, or why a bad event happened to them, it is this broader type of meaning that is in question. A long tradition of existentially and humanistically oriented writers—ranging from Camus (1955) to Sartre (1964), from Frankl (1963) to Yalom (1980a, b)—have pondered the question of meaning at this macro level. They wrote about the predicament of an inherently meaning-seeking animal being thrown into a universe that does not come furnished with preordained meanings, and emphasized the necessity for each individual to construct their own meaning system. Failure to construct such a meaning system—living without goals, values, or ideals—is associated with considerable distress (Frankl 1963; Yalom 1980a, b), whereas the presence of meaning in life is associated with psychological well-being and a plethora of desirable qualities (e.g., Zika and Chamberlain 1992), including longevity. A recent study found that among community-dwelling older people, a high sense of purpose in life was associated with a 57 % decrease in mortality risk across 5 years (Boyle et al. 2009).

Going back to the theme that the essence of meaning is connection, in small-m-meaning, connections are made between simpler, lower-level, relatively more concrete entities (e.g., between a word and its referent), whereas in capital-M-meaning, connections are between the more complex, higher-level, abstract entities (e.g., between the self and the universe). Daily life is abundant with small-m-meaning, whereas capital-M-meaning is something that is sought after rather than something that is readily confirmed. Culture and its attendant phenomena, such as language, institutions, and norms, serve as repositories of meaning, in the small as well as grand sense of the word (Chao and Kesebir, 2012). Meaning, at both levels, is closely intertwined with an awareness of mortality and

serves to buffer people from death anxiety. Before starting to elaborate on this core argument of our chapter, we review the often underappreciated role of death anxiety in motivating the human psyche.

Terror Management Theory

Self-awareness is a tremendously adaptive cognitive capacity that expands the self's options of how to behave and affords greater regulatory control over one's actions (Carver and Scheier 1981; Duval and Wicklund 1972). Combined with other uniquely human capacities such as language, causal thinking, and imagination, reflexive self-awareness has been of critical importance to the foundation of human culture as we know it today. Yet self-awareness is not an unmitigated blessing. Although it creates lots of new opportunities for the self, it also leads to an inevitable recognition of one's limits, vulnerability, and ultimate mortality. In a number of influential writings, cultural anthropologist Becker (1971, 1973, 1975) argued that the prospect of death was unbearable to a self-aware animal and that the terror born from this knowledge was a mainspring of human activity. Accordingly, a key function of individual character and cultural institutions is to deny one's mortality and avert this terror. By participating in and contributing to a cultural system that imbues existence with order, purpose, and permanence, the individual obtains a sense of value and unshakable meaning, which is a primary defense against the terror-inducing awareness of mortality.

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al. 1986, 1997) draws largely from Becker and posits that awareness of mortality, when combined with the biologically rooted desire for life, creates a potential for paralyzing terror. To function effectively in the world, people need to ward off this terror in some way. According to TMT, this much needed protection is provided by an existential anxiety buffer, the key components of which are self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview, and close interpersonal relations. Since it was first introduced, hundreds of studies conducted in different parts of the world have tested and supported hypotheses derived from TMT. They show that reminders of mortality amplify the striving to maintain, bolster, and defend one's cultural worldview, self-esteem, and close relationships (Burke et al. 2010). Threats to these things, on the other hand, increase the accessibility of death-related cognition (Hayes et al. 2010). As a whole, the TMT body of research points to death anxiety as a singularly important motivating force, playing a role in domains as varied as religion and spirituality, human sexuality, legal decision-making, consumer behavior, and psychopathology (see Kesebir and Pyszczynski 2012).

The TMT literature has revealed that sense of meaning is a crucial ingredient of the existential anxiety buffer (for recent overviews of the topic, see Arndt et al. in press; Vess in press). At both micro and macro levels, meaning is profoundly comforting for the psyche and helps to keep death anxiety at bay. We now turn to an examination of this existentially protective function of meaning.

Mortality Awareness and Lower Levels of Meaning

As we noted above, at a micro level, meaning involves the idea of comprehensibility—a perceived match between what is given and what is expected. People rely on well-learned knowledge structures while navigating life, because these provide an epistemic basis for confident action. As a result, we desire the elements of life to be orderly and predictable, to conform to our existing mental templates, and not be incoherent or confusing. That is why departures from familiar meaning structures (e.g., exposure to absurdist literature, art, or comedy) can be unsettling and elicit defensive responses aimed at reconstructing a sense of meaning (Proulx et al. 2010). This strong desire we harbor for things to make sense is clearly rooted in evolution and has indispensable adaptive functions for human kind. We argue, however, that meaning at this micro level also serves existential functions and helps people cope with the potentially terror-inducing awareness of their mortality. We need small-m-meaning, among other things, because its violation shakes the foundation of reality as we know it, taking away our sense of control and threatening our capacity for behavior that enhances self-esteem, which ultimately causes anxiety to leak through the psychological armor. A world where things do not make sense is an entirely dangerous place where death feels much closer.

In line with this reasoning, a number of TMT studies reveal that reminders of mortality increase people's preference for familiar meaning structures and attract them to clarity, order, and consistency. Attesting to the notion that concerns about death amplify the need for consistency, Friedman and Arndt (2005) demonstrated that participants who wrote counter-attitudinal statements without sufficient justification tried harder to reduce dissonance when they were reminded of their mortality, compared to a control condition. Other research found that mortality salience reduced appreciation for seemingly meaningless works of modern art, unless the paintings were accompanied by a title or frame of reference that imbued them with meaning (Landau et al. 2006). Importantly, this effect was especially pronounced among individuals with a strong need for structure.

Personal need for structure (Neuberg and Newsom 1993) and need for closure (Webster and Kruglanski 1994) refer to a preference for cognitive simplicity and structure. People who score high on these variables tend to dislike complexity, ambiguity and inconsistency, and are drawn to simpler, more clean-cut interpretations of reality. It is these kinds of people for whom existential security should be most dependent on well-defined meaning structures, and for whom reminders of death should elicit the strongest attempts to restore meaning. A multitude of studies lend support to this idea. For instance, whereas mortality salience leads to an increased preference for stereotype-consistent individuals and decreased liking for stereotype-inconsistent individuals, this effect is stronger for people with a strong need for closure (Schimel et al. 1999). Similarly, in a series of studies, Landau and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that mortality salience led to an exaggerated desire to see the social world as well-ordered and benign, but only among people with a strong personal need for structure. After reminders of their mortality, people

with a strong personal need for structure also displayed a decreased preference for a dispositionally ambiguous target person, increased preference for balanced rather than imbalanced interpersonal relationships, and an increased desire for a just, benevolent world. As a whole, these studies indicate that existential anxiety can motivate a need to rely on existing, benign meaning structures, especially for people who are drawn to simple and unambiguous interpretations of the world.

Mortality Awareness and Higher Levels of Meaning

Higher levels of meaning are characterized by complex, far-reaching connections that transcend the immediate situation and can even reach timeless or eternal perspectives (Baumeister 1991). It is well-established that time horizon is closely associated with level of meaning: low levels of meaning are about the short-term, and high levels of meaning are about the long term (Trope and Liberman 2003; Vallacher and Wegner 1985). Thoughts about death tend to invoke a desire for higher levels of meaning and the consideration of more expansive time horizons. In support of this notion, Landau et al. (2011) have shown that being exposed to an existential threat led people to imbue mundane actions with more abstract and temporally expansive meaning: following mortality salience, they viewed their everyday actions (e.g., locking a door, tooth brushing) more in terms of why they were performed than how they were performed, they drew more connections between their current actions and their personally significant future goals, and perceived past actions as particularly consequential in molding their current self.

There is also evidence that mortality thoughts fuel teleological attributions—beliefs that things exist and happen for a reason, that there is a purpose to everything. Such beliefs seem to effectively soothe death anxiety. For instance, Davis et al. (2011) found that experimentally induced teleological beliefs about the natural world (e.g., "Bees carry pollen in order to help flowers reproduce") decreased the accessibility of death thoughts, whereas mortality reminders increased belief in a purposeful world and in scientifically unwarranted teleological statements (e.g., "Forest fires occur in order to clean up the forest"). Similarly, Bassett and Going (2012) reported that mortality salience manipulation increased study participants' endorsements that a negative, life-altering event "happened as part of a grand purpose even if those involved don't realize it." They also found that mortality salience made participants less likely to think that occurrences were due to chance or luck, especially when these occurrences had significant consequences.

The capacity for self-consciousness and self-transcendence, for stepping back and "viewing ourselves from a perspective broader than we can occupy in the flesh" (Nagel 1971, p. 725), is the crowning achievement of the symbolic animal. Yet, as we have noted, these most advanced, most precious traits of humankind come with a price: they invite profoundly disturbing insights. The brevity of our lives and the minuteness of our existence in the vastness of the universe become all too apparent when we look at ourselves from the perspective of the eternal.

"The meaning of it all" becomes an inevitable question. Yalom (1980a, b) differentiated between two types of such higher-level meaning. He wrote that "What is the meaning of life?" is an inquiry about cosmic meaning, "about whether life in general or at least human life fits into some overall coherent pattern" (p. 423). This type of meaning usually implies a grand design—some supernatural, spiritual, or divine ordering of the universe. The inquiry into "what is the meaning of my life", on the other hand, is about terrestrial meaning. Terrestrial meaning is related to having a purpose and overriding goals in life—the sense that one has reasons to get out of bed every morning, a function to fulfill in life. TMT argues that the desire to supply life with meaning, be it of cosmic or terrestrial nature, is partly motivated by an awareness of our existence as fragile and finite on the cosmic scale of time and space. Our knowledge of the inescapability of death gives rise to a potential for paralyzing existential terror, and one effective way to cope with this terror is to imbue life with meaning.

Mortality and Cosmic Meaning

Cosmic meaning entails the notion that the universe and human existence fit into some overall coherent "master plan." Believing that there is a superordinate design to life and that each person has a role to play in this design can be an extraordinary source of security and comfort in the face of death anxiety. For most people, no human institution is in a better position to provide this sense of meaning than religion, which probably helps to explain its enduring popularity in various forms across time and space. Religions typically supply the individual with a comprehensive meaning schema, according to which the world and human life are part of a divinely ordained plan. This plan includes explanations about the "whence and whither" of humankind, and theodicies to understand why suffering exists. This broad, overarching framework of meaning, together with the promise of afterlife offered by the vast majority of religions, offer an effective antidote to death anxiety.

Empirical evidence for the terror management function of religions is robust. For example, Batson et al. (1993) reported that intrinsic, genuinely held religious beliefs are associated with lessened death anxiety and heightened existential well-being. Jonas and Fischer (2006) found that people high in intrinsic religiousness displayed lower death-thought accessibility following mortality salience if they were given a chance to affirm their religious beliefs. Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) demonstrated that after the activation of death thoughts, participants, and particularly those who were religiously affiliated, reported stronger belief in God and divine intervention, even showing greater belief in spiritual entities associated with religious faiths other than their own. These and other studies reveal the link between mortality concerns and religious inclination (for a comprehensive review see Vail et al. 2010) and emphasize the importance of religion as a uniquely potent provider of cosmic meaning in shielding people from death anxiety.

Mortality and Terrestrial Meaning

The past few centuries and especially decades have witnessed the decline of religious worldviews in the developed world, indicating a potential decline in cosmic meaning. Having a sense of cosmic meaning surely helps to assuage existential anxiety, yet at the same time, many people seem to be fine without it. Having terrestrial meaning in one's life—a solid answer to the question "what is the meaning of my life?"—on the other hand, might be more indispensable to psychological well-being. Awareness of the transience and finiteness of life inevitably prompts questions about the meaning of life. For example, Tolstoy, at the age of 50 and on the verge of suicide, voiced his own questions in this way: "What will come from what I am doing now, and may do tomorrow? What will come from my whole life? Otherwise expressed—Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything? Again, in other words, is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?" (1929, p. 20).

The claim that death robs life of its meaning, echoed by Tolstoy, is somewhat ironic however. Try for a moment to imagine life without death. Does it strike you as a particularly desirable idea? Does an infinite life necessarily promise more meaning than a finite life? This is doubtful. On the contrary, as many philosophers have noted, what gives life its depth, meaning, and intensity is mostly that it is finite, that it is transient. Of course, regardless of what such rational analyses suggest, the reality of mortality is instinctively abhorrent and almost automatically provokes questions about meaning in life. The idea of death and meaning in life are so intimately related that thinking about meaning in life increases the accessibility of death thoughts (Taubman-Ben-Ari 2011). It thus seems virtually impossible to think about the meaning of life without arousing thoughts about death. In direct support of the hypothesis that meaning in life protects against death anxiety, Routledge and Juhl (2010) document that mortality salience increases death anxiety but only for those who reported a low sense of meaning in life.

How do people go about securing the terrestrial meaning that we argue is so critical to existential well-being? Above everything else, they try to achieve some sort of identity and significance in the world, to leave their print in the sands of time—thereby rendering annihilation through death a less unbearable prospect. In Ernest Yalom's words, "meaning, used in the sense of one's life having made a difference, of one's having mattered, of one's having left part of oneself for posterity, seems derivative of the wish not to perish" (1980, p. 465). In order not to "perish", people seek meaning in endeavors that promise some sort of continuance across time and space. In keeping with the notion that connection is the essence of meaning, meaning in life involves connection to entities larger and longer-lasting than oneself—those that offer the hope of transcending transience and somehow enduring in the world, those that provide people with symbolic immortality. Symbolic immortality refers to the sense that one is a valuable part of something larger, more significant, and longer lasting than one's individual existence—something so vast and meaningful that it will not be shattered by one's personal death (Lifton

1979). People seek symbolic immortality through the family, nation, religion, science, art, or other aspects of their cultural worldviews. By expanding themselves in and merging with such causes of lasting worth, they not only attain a sense of enduring self-significance and meaning, but simultaneously shield themselves against existential anxiety (Florian and Mikulincer 1998).

Self-esteem and meaning in life are closely associated (e.g., Baumeister 1991; Heine et al. 2006). We view self-esteem as a gauge of how well one's project of symbolic immortality is progressing, which would explain the positive correlation between self-esteem and meaning in life. Participating in grand causes that are not doomed to a mortal human fate and living up to one's values and ideals can be a wellspring of both self-esteem and meaning in life. Self-esteem is a major component of the existential anxiety buffer and an avalanche of TMT studies has documented its role in moderating responses to death reminders (e.g., Greenberg et al. 1992; Harmon-Jones et al. 1997). Although a detailed overview of this body of work is beyond the scope of this chapter (for recent overviews see Arndt 2012; Pyszczynski and Kesebir 2013), it should be noted that, to the extent that self-esteem and meaning in life are overlapping constructs, studies into the existential functions of self-esteem also testify to the role of personal meaning as an existential anxiety buffer. Further underscoring the interdependence of self-esteem and meaning in life, research finds that mortality salience increases perceptions of meaning in life for those high in self-esteem, but decreases it for people with low self-esteem (Routledge et al. 2010; Taubman-Ben-Ari 2011). Presumably, death cognitions intensify the need to find meaning in one's existence, and for those who are feeling good about themselves and their symbolic immortality project, this leads to an increased perception of meaning in life. In contrast, for those who feel they are not faring well in their existence project, thoughts of mortality result in views of their life as less meaningful.

It is important to emphasize that all the striving to transcend death and insignificance plays out in culture. Spheres of life in which people typically seek and find meaning—be it religion, politics, science, or art—are uniquely human, uniquely cultural. Cultures thus serve as the critical source for the higher contexts and larger schemes that are evocative of infinity, thereby fulfilling important existential functions (Becker 1973; Kesebir 2011). Accordingly, cultural worldviews are an essential component of the existential anxiety buffer and mortality reminders intensify the need to hold on to one's worldview and defend it against rival worldviews (Greenberg et al. 1990). People derive ultimate meaning and value from their cultural worldviews, and that is what makes them such effective shields against existential anxiety. On the flip side, because they are imbued with such extraordinary, and at times sacred, meaning, people are willing to go to extreme lengths to protect themselves against perceived attacks, especially when existential concerns are elevated, resulting in intractable intergroup conflict and violence (for overviews of the topic, see Greenberg et al. 2009; Kesebir and Pyszczynski 2011; Niesta et al. 2008).

When people are asked what gives meaning to their lives, the majority indicate their relationships with other people as the most important source of this meaning (Emmons 2003; Steger 2009). Close relationships with others constitute a vital

part of the existential anxiety buffer (Hart et al. 2005; Mikulincer et al. 2003), and we argue that, as with self-esteem and faith in cultural worldviews, part of their existentially soothing function lies in the sense of meaning they provide.

A number of scholars have suggested that the self is a poor place to find meaning, and that any enduring source of meaning in life should involve devotion to something larger (e.g., Baumeister 1991; Seligman 2002; Reker and Wong 1988). We share this contention—only endeavors in domains which transcend the self (e.g., work, relationships, dedication to a political cause, religion, science) and contain "a glimpse of eternity" (Emmons 2003, p. 113) can shield people from fears of meaninglessness and insignificance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we approached the need for meaning from an existential perspective, and argued that meaning at both micro and macro levels is crucial to ward off the fear accompanying awareness of mortality. At a micro level, we need things to make sense and fit the knowledge schemas with which we are familiar, or at least comfortable. Particularly for people who have a stronger need for order, structure, and clarity, securing this type of meaning can play an essential role in buffering death anxiety. At a macro level, perceptions of life as meaningful are vital to keep death anxiety at bay. Becker wrote that "man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level" (1973, p. 196), and indeed people everywhere seek personal meaning in domains that could allow them to transcend their corporal and temporal limitations. Sources of meaning in life and the components of the existential anxiety buffer as delineated by TMT (e.g., symbolic immortality, self-esteem, faith in cultural worldviews, and close personal relationships) overlap remarkably, highlighting once more the centrality of meaning to any endeavor aimed at symbolically defying death.

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