

# Crises of meaning – when foundations shake

By Tatjana Schnell, 2020

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In most cases, crises of meaning occur when external events rupture the experience of continuity or when internal contradictions exceed a critical level. They are accompanied by a realisation that things are not as assumed, as expected or hoped for. Crises of meaning are painful but can be viewed as constructive because they motivate us to develop a different – usually more realistic – view of the world. One of our interviewees described the experience as follows: “Behavioural patterns that no longer fit, an idea of life that was abruptly abandoned. Yes, and having to realise that preconceived opinions or castles built . . . that reality was different and that it just didn’t fit” (quoted from Tobias, 2010).

### 8.1 A lack of meaning

Crises of meaning are painful. They are typically associated with depression, anxiety, pessimism and negative mood (Damásio, Koller, & Schnell, 2013; Pedersen et al., 2018; Schnell, 2009; Sørensen et al., 2019). At the same time, positive affect, life satisfaction, hope and self-efficacy are greatly reduced (Damásio et al., 2013; Pedersen et al., 2018; Schnell, 2009). Resilience is also significantly diminished, and self-regulation processes such as self-determination, self-motivation, self-calming, self-perception and coping with failure are limited (Hanfstingl, 2013; Sørensen et al., 2019). Accordingly, people in such a phase tend to withdraw; they find it almost impossible to describe their situation or explain it to others (Tobias, 2010). Moreover, a study with Peruvian pupils has shown that crises of meaning are a strong predictor of suicidality. In male students, crises of meaning even predicted suicidal tendencies better than depression and highly stressful events (Schnell, Gerstner, & Krampe, 2018).

Time and again, there are cases in which an unresolved crisis of meaning has dramatic consequences for others as well. This is how the student Bastian B., who ran amok at his school in Emsdetten in 2006, described his desperation in a suicide note (Bastian, 2006; transl. TS):

What's all this for? Why should I work? To bust a gut in order to retire at the age of 65 and die 5 years later? Why should I try hard to achieve anything if it does not matter a damn anyway because I'm going to die sooner or later?

I can build a house, have children and what not. But what for? The house will be demolished at some point, and the children will die, too. So please, what is the meaning of life?

Nevertheless, existentialist philosophers emphasise the necessity of such critical confrontations on the way to an authentic life. Heidegger argues to admit the angst that makes us ask about the meaning of being (Heidegger, 2008). Angst arises when familiar convictions and illusions are questioned, when it is only a matter of me and the world. In this situation, existence acquires an alienated quality: We become aware of our isolation, finiteness, meaninglessness and of the freedom from which the responsibility for our action arises. As another of our interviewees explained, "It is a feeling of simply not having any hold, of being truly alone. And it was in this sense that the thought occurred to me that life actually has no meaning, that nothing has meaning" (quoted from Tobias, 2010).

Whether we arrive there as a result of intellectual courage or because we were struck by an external event, this angst has great potential. It shows us the possibilities of our potentiality for being which lie beyond routine and superficiality. Accordingly, crises of meaning are motivating; they lead to an active and illusionless search for meaning (Klinger, 1998; Skaggs & Barron, 2006; Tobias, 2010). Another interviewee said, "I am definitely searching for a meaning in my life, even if this search should result in the fact that there does not necessarily have to be a meaning of life" (quoted from Tobias, 2010).

## **8.2 Are Western societies in a crisis of meaning?**

Based on the results of our 2006 representative survey in Germany (Schnell & Becker, 2007), I wrote an article in which I questioned the epidemic of crises of meaning (midlife crisis, quarterlife crisis, crises at

work, etc.) as repeatedly proclaimed by the media (Schnell, 2008). In our sample, which represented an average of the population, only 4 percent had reported a crisis of meaning. Since then, however, things have obviously changed.

Data from the past five years substantiate that the number of crises of meaning has risen significantly. Since we did not have the opportunity to conduct another representative survey, the following results come from various data sets, collected from 2015 to 2018 and with a total of more than 8,000 German-speaking participants. From these, stratified random samples were drawn to obtain a demographic approximation to the general population. The resulting sample contains data from 1,291 people. The average age of the group is 45 years; in it, men and women are equally represented. The level of education for the younger participants and those of middle age reflects that of society, whereas participants aged 60 and over have a slightly higher level of education than the general population. In this sample, the point prevalence of crisis of meaning amounts to 14 percent.

Whereas previously the peak value was in midlife, we now see that crises of meaning occur most frequently among young people (Figure 8.1). As many as 27 percent of those aged 16 to 29 experience a crisis of meaning. Even in middle age, the prevalence is still high: 15–17 percent. People over 60 are least likely to report crises of meaning (4–5 percent). This suggests that the transition from working life to retirement is

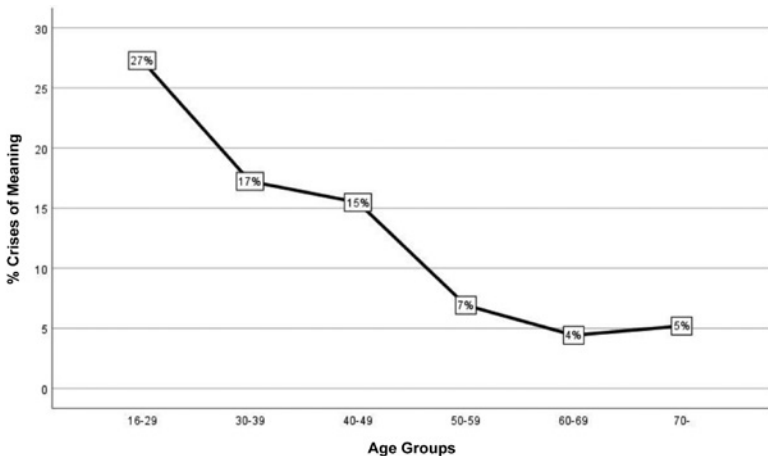


Figure 8.1 Crises of meaning (%) in six age groups (N = 1,291)

rarely a traumatic experience today. Perhaps the relief of having escaped the pressures of working life outweighs the trauma.

But for some, life still holds one last difficult challenge in store – as might be indicated by the slightly renewed increase of crises of meaning at the age of 70 and above (Figure 8.1). Rudolf Vogel visited and interviewed 36 people with an average age of 85 in nursing homes (Vogel, 2010). They completed the SoMe and various open interview questions. More than half of them said they were experiencing a crisis of meaning. Statements like “Every day is a good day for me to die” and “I would rather die today than tomorrow” were frequent. Vogel attributes these crises of meaning to a prevailing lack of perspective among those affected. As the respondents explained, they experienced “no longer being needed” and “not having any responsibility.” They were afraid of losing control and thus coming under the control of others. It was not death itself that caused fear and suffering but the living conditions until then.

Restrictions, discomfort and loneliness can severely affect the quality of life in old age. This is also reflected in national surveys on subjective well-being. A longitudinal study examined well-being in old age in Germany, Great Britain and the United States (Gerstorf et al., 2010). Their conclusion was reflected in the title: “Something is seriously wrong at the end of life.” In all three countries, the well-being of the population declined rapidly three to five years before death. We apparently have a problem dealing with age-related decline and dying in general (see also Schnell, 2018).

We recently conducted a study on the prevalence of crises of meaning, in which we also asked whether the participants had experienced a crisis of meaning at any point in their lives. We asked those who affirmed for their assessment of what may have triggered the crisis. In the 16–39 age group, the majority indicated that a period of transition had caused the crisis. In most cases, the explanations referred to difficulties in making decisions with regard to the further course of life (“simply not knowing what exactly should come next, where I should go in my life”; “compulsion to decide between unpleasant alternatives”; and “no idea how my life should continue after school”).

In the case of older study participants, critical life events were mostly cited as the trigger for crises of meaning. For 40–50-year-olds, these were often separations and professional conflicts (“being abandoned by my girlfriend at the time”; “separation, loss of job”; “feeling of meaninglessness at work”), while for those over 50, illnesses and family conflicts played a greater role (“being caught in the middle

between husband and parents, cancer”; “death of brother, dementia of mother, burnout”; “the insight that I had to let go of my three adult children”).

### 8.3 Overcoming crises of meaning

Crises of meaning are often part of depression. In this case, it is advisable to seek professional advice, to start therapeutic and perhaps psychopharmacological treatment. The risk of suicide must also be clarified. However, a crisis of meaning can also stand for itself, as an existential problem, independent of a mental disorder. Thoughts of death, even of suicide, are not necessarily indicators of suicidal tendencies. Rather, they are close to the question of meaning: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 2018, p. 3). The explicit confrontation with one’s own mortality might be necessary on the way to authenticity. One may come to the conclusion with Sartre that death robs life of all meaning (Sartre, 2000) and that it is precisely for this reason that humans must give meaning to their own lives. Or perhaps Frankl is right that our mortality can motivate us to take responsibility for our actions in the present to “rescue” them into the reality of the past (Frankl, 2014). Yalom (1980) puts it like this: “Although the physicality of death destroys man, the idea of death saves him” (p. 30).

Due to the strong mental impairment during a crisis of meaning, people usually experience it as difficult to cope with everyday life, to “function.” A confrontation with experienced meaninglessness needs space and time. It is advantageous, if not indispensable, therefore, to take time out. Furthermore, it is helpful to be close to a person who is available as a companion, either privately or professionally (e.g. existential psychotherapy, logotherapy, pastoral care, philosophical practice). A retreat from the familiar environment and a visit to a place of silence and shelter (monastery, retreat, etc.) can also be valuable.

Similar to anxiety disorders, a crisis of meaning – with a predominant feeling of existential angst – requires an active approach to anxiety and anxiety-inducing issues. This confrontation may be painful, but it can save us, as Yalom assures us. In contrast to anxiety disorders, the angst that accompanies a crisis of meaning usually is not catastrophic or irrational. It is real, arises from the impositions of the factuality of one’s own death, the freedom of choice and the resulting responsibility, from the absurdity of the world or, in the case of believers, from God being concealed (*deus absconditus*).

Existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Tillich speak of the need to admit the burden of the crisis, to allow suffering to take place in order to experience its transformative power (Schnell, 2018). It is on this basis that clarification of the mind can take place. The crisis challenges previous beliefs. In due course, we either regain them or replace them with new insights. The cornerstones of existence are thus redefined. Successful reorientation provides a direction that motivates meaningful action by pursuing goals and intermediary steps.

In this context, it seems less productive to explicitly search for meaning (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Meaning cannot be found in thought. Rather, it requires the willingness to trust in the possibility of the meaningfulness of one's life – in the sense of a "leap of faith." Such trust often grows when despair is great. Paul Tillich (2015) describes despair as an experience that nothing or nobody holds or helps. But it is also a situation in which a person can realise that they experience meaninglessness only because they have an understanding of meaning; that their despair is possible only because they *are*; and that they continue to be, even if everything that was previously valid is obviously no longer valid. This experience, which is difficult to communicate, is described as an experience of being accepted (Tillich, 2014) or as a transformation of heaviness and strangeness into familiarity and loyalty (Rilke, 1904/2002). So Rilke writes,

And if only we regulate our life according to that principle which advises us always to hold to the difficult what even now appears most alien to us will become most familiar and loyal. How could we forget those old myths which are to be found in the beginnings of every people; the myths of the dragons which are transformed, at the last moment, into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our life are princesses, who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrifying is at bottom the helplessness that seeks our help.

(Rilke, 1904/2002, p. 39)

Such an experience of alienation or fright can give rise to trust in the meaning of one's life, which in turn motivates one to discover personal sources of meaning and put them into practice, according to a top-down interpretation of the hierarchic model of meaning (Section 4.1). Laddered conversations or the SoMe-Card Method (la Cour & Schnell, 2019, 2020; Schnell & la Cour, 2018) open up possibilities for remembering or identifying sources of meaning that are of actual relevance.

The questions can be used to reveal what shapes and controls our lives. They assist in evaluating and identifying practical options for action or in searching for alternatives.

If it does not seem possible for a person to grant life such an “advance of trust,” another possibility is to evoke experiences of meaningfulness through concrete actions, in the sense of a bottom-up reading of the model of meaning. Here generative actions have proven to be effective especially when they tie in with the individual’s personal lifeworld. For example, Steven Southwick and his colleagues have encouraged their patients – war veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder – to develop and implement voluntary projects as part of their therapy. As a result, patients experienced an increase in self-efficacy, their sense of responsibility and purpose (Southwick, Gilmartin, McDonough, & Morrissey, 2006). Their view of themselves and their lives changed fundamentally as a result of this generative action: They realised that they meant something to others.

Specific interventions developed to support meaning in life are presented in Chapter 11.

#### **8.4 A brief discourse: pilgrimage – on the way to meaning**

Pilgrimage is an archaic religious ritual – and it enjoys great popularity. Over the past five years, approximately 281,300 people have set out each year to follow the pilgrims’ trail to Santiago de Compostela (Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, 2019); the trend is rising. They travel for many weeks, covering hundreds of kilometres on foot. Why do people make such an effort? In early Christianity, pilgrimages were made in the hope of purification, repentance or healing (Haab, 1998). Today, only a minority of (German-speaking) pilgrims are religiously motivated – and yet their expectations do not seem so dissimilar to those of their predecessors.

Sarah Pali and I conducted a longitudinal study with people who walked the Way of St. James to Santiago de Compostela. A total of 85 people aged 16 to 70, 72 percent of whom were women, answered our questionnaire before their departure. When asked about the motives for their trip, 66 percent said they “wanted to gain clarity.” Athletic (44 percent), spiritual (39 percent), religious (31 percent) and cultural (26 percent) motives followed at a clear distance (multiple answers were possible). The pilgrims who hoped for clarification also showed high scores in crisis of meaning.

On the basis of our follow-up surveys one week later and four months later, we can say that still today a pilgrimage appears to be an extremely

efficient way of purification – in the sense of mental or spiritual clarification. After the pilgrimage, all signs of a crisis of meaning had disappeared, while meaningfulness had clearly increased – both immediately after the journey and four months later. In addition, in both follow-up surveys, pilgrims reported increased selftranscendence (both vertical and horizontal) and selfactualisation.

What happens during a pilgrimage, and what is its transformative and meaningful potential? Pilgrimage on the Way of St. James is a formalised event structured like a ritual (Schnell & Pali, 2013). All three phases of a rite of passage can be discerned (van Gennep, 1960): In the phase of detachment, the pilgrims separate from their everyday lives, which can amount to a complex undertaking. In our study, the average distance travelled was 646 km, which takes about four to five weeks. Such a long absence from work and social connections demands careful preparation. At the moment of departure, all identity-establishing roles and insignia are left behind.

Thus “disrobed,” the travellers enter the second phase, the so-called liminal phase. Here, they assume their new role as pilgrims – symbolised by the pilgrim’s identity card and perhaps a scallop attached to their backpack. In the liminal phase, pilgrims expose themselves to transformative events. They are particularly receptive and vulnerable then, as the ritual theorists Victor and Edith Turner (1969, 1978) describe. Although the pilgrims’ way to Santiago is known for its strong pilgrim traffic large parts of the journey are covered alone and in silence. A stimulus deprivation occurs, which directs the attention of the walkers to internal processes. Conflicts, which until then had been ignored or repressed by the hectic pace of everyday life, are now pushing their way into consciousness. At the same time, the rhythm and monotony of walking induces a kind of trance. As d’Aquili, Laughlin and McManus reported back in 1979, evenly repeated movements support the synchronisation of perception, cognition and action. Experiences of selftranscendence are thereby facilitated, such as the loss of self, space and time; experiences of unity; increased awareness; sudden insights or cognitions. Walking in silence thus provides a framework that promotes conscious self-exploration and unconscious forms of reordering priorities. Alternative perspectives on the world and the self open up; one’s view widens; and from a kind of meta-perspective, contexts of meaning become (newly) apparent. “Clarification” occurs Schnell & Pali, 2013).

The third and last phase marks the end of the ritual, the return and reintegration into everyday life – but as a different person. The task here is to take on the newly acquired identity in a familiar environment. This is often perceived as difficult. The transformed person returns to an



everyday life that is still the same. It is almost impossible for pilgrims to share the profound experiences that they had during their journey (Pali, 2010). Our data reflect this process: Meaningfulness scores reached a high peak immediately after the return but fell slightly over the next few months (yet remained significantly above the baseline). Rigid social, professional and economic structures can hinder the implementation of new insights and dampen enthusiasm. On the other hand, the newly acquired sources of meaning proved to be more stable. After four months, vertical and horizontal selftranscendence as well as selfactualisation scores were still higher than before departure.

## **8.5 Know thyself!**

### ***SELF-EXPLORATION: POSITIVE ILLUSIONS – BECAUSE THEY'RE GOOD FOR YOU (PERHAPS)***

With great and varied skills we create a delusion that enables us to coexist serenely with the most monstrous things, simply because we recognize these frozen grimaces of the universe as a table or a chair, a shout or an outstretched arm, a speed or a roast chicken. We are capable of living between one open chasm of sky above our heads and another, slightly camouflaged chasm of sky beneath our feet, feeling as untroubled on earth as if we were in a room with the door closed.

(Musil, 2011, p. 574)

Crises of meaning are characterised by the fact that some positive assumptions about the world are exposed as illusions. In psychology, we know about the concept of positive illusions. Everyday processes of perception are characterised by three kinds of distortions of reality: self-aggrandisement, unrealistic optimism and exaggerated notions of control (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Several studies conclude that such illusions are positive because they increase well-being and have a psychologically protective effect. Some examples of positive illusions are listed next. Do you recognise yourself in them? What do you think of such distortions of reality?

### ***JUST-WORLD BELIEF***

The belief that we generally get what we deserve and that the world is orderly and just. (“There will be a reason for this if he is bullied by his colleagues. He has always been such a strange guy.”)

### **ABOVE-AVERAGE ILLUSION**

The belief that we are more intelligent, more attractive, more interesting, more just or more organised than average people. (“I do my job better than my colleagues.”)

### **OPTIMISTIC FALLACY**

We estimate our health risks to be lower than those of others. (“I know about the dangers of alcohol, but I have my drinking under control; the two or three glasses of wine in the evening are rather good for my health.”)

### **LEARNED OPTIMISM**

Success is attributed to our motivation and competence, whereas failure is attributed to external disturbing events. (“I received the funding because I wrote a brilliant proposal.” “I didn’t get the funding because too many people applied for it this time.”)

### **ILLUSION OF IMMORTALITY**

Generally behaving as if we are going to live forever, perceiving death as so distant that it has no relevance to the present. (“Others die, but I am far from it!”)

### **“THAT’S HOW YOU DO IT”**

As long as we do what “one” does, we do not have to assume responsibility; conformity replaces the necessity of our own decisions of conscience. (“I acted only according to the guidelines!” “My colleagues do the same.”)

When in a crisis of meaning, previously viable positive illusions are destroyed: Should they be rebuilt as part of overcoming the crisis of meaning, or does this contradict an honest confrontation with reality?

## **8.6 Literature**

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