

On the Cultivation of Adolescent's Sense of Meaning from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology studies people's positive psychological qualities, focuses on their health, happiness, and harmonious development. In the perspective of positive psychology, sense of meaning refers to an individual's experience and feeling of their own life, existence, goals, meaning, and value. The "fading" of adolescents' sense of meaning is manifested as feeling that life is boring, having strong and overwhelming emotional suppression, being at a loss for real life problems, and not cherishing life. The main reasons are excessive learning pressure, unfriendly living environment, lack of emotional relief channels, and severe lack of life education. The main path to cultivating adolescents' sense of meaning is to enable them to gain positive emotional experiences, promote positive life cognition, create a positive social environment, and engage in positive psychological interventions.

Keywords

Positive psychology, adolescent, sense of meaning.

1. Introduction

The pervasive sense of meaninglessness in modern society - as Max Weber pointed out, people who have lost their ideological home can only settle for "living without faith in a meaningless world" - is also affecting teenagers. Why are some adolescents often unhappy? Why is the incidence of depression among adolescents increasing? Why do extreme incidents of adolescents suicide often occur? The fundamental psychological reason is the loss of meaning. How can adolescents achieve a state of mind filled with positive spirit, optimistic hope, and exuding vitality like spring? From the perspective of positive psychology, this is an issue related to "sense of meaning".

2. The Sense of Meaning from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

Unlike traditional psychology that focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of psychological problems and illnesses, positive psychology advocates a positive orientation in psychology, studies people's positive psychological qualities, and pays attention to their health, happiness, and harmonious development, thus achieving a revolution in the field of psychology. At the subjective level, the research themes of positive psychology focus on positive subjective experiences such as subjective well-being and optimism, as well as the relationship between positive emotions and physical health. At the individual level, positive psychology focuses on studying positive personality traits of individuals, such as love, forgiveness, gratitude, wisdom, and optimism. At the group level, positive psychology focuses on the study of the relationship between the population and the social environment, such as the environmental factors that affect individual development and achieve happiness.

The goal of positive psychology is to explore the factors that promote the good development of individuals, groups, and society, and how these factors can enhance human health, happiness, autonomy, optimism, wisdom, creativity, joy, meaning of life, and other positive potentials, thereby promoting social prosperity. In positive psychology, a sense of meaning is undoubtedly the most important psychological factor or quality. What is "sense of meaning"? Before defining the sense of meaning, it is necessary to analyze the prerequisite question of "what is meaning". The so-called "meaning" refers to the subjective evaluation of value acquisition, which promotes the development of the subject and improves its subjectivity. If a person cannot have a correct understanding of life and its meaning, they cannot establish a correct outlook on life. The psychology of Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler defines the meaning of life as developing an interest in peers, being a member of a group, and contributing one's own efforts to human happiness. He classified the meaning of life into three categories based on the three major relationships in life: the relationship with the objective environment, the relationship with others, and the relationship with the opposite sex. Then, the meaning of life is divided into three categories: professional meaning, social meaning, and gender meaning. Adler defined the meaning of life as making contributions to society, caring for others, and solving problems through cooperation, which provides positive reference and inspiration for us to understand the sense of meaning of teenagers.

In general, the so-called sense of meaning refers to an individual's experience and feeling about goals, meaning, and value of their own life and survival. The generation of a sense of meaning depends on the degree to which individuals perceive meaning in the essence of life and things that are important to themselves. The generation of a sense of meaning includes experiencing meaning and seeking meaning. Experiencing meaning is a psychological process that primarily manifests as an evaluation of life. Seeking meaning is a behavioral process, mainly manifested as the degree of effort individuals put into pursuing the meaning of life. [1] Positive psychology is the psychological key that helps people truly reach the other side of happiness. In the perspective of positive psychology, the importance of the meaning of life lies in the fact that people can protect their mental health and happiness through a sense of meaning in life. [2]

3. The "Fading" of Adolescents' Sense of Meaning: Problems and Reasons

In an unstable and uncertain era, a lack of meaning can lead to boredom, anxiety, and alienation, experiencing a vacuum of existence. [3] The "fading" of sense of meaning or meaningless among adolescents not only affects their learning and daily life, but may also cause sustained and profound harm to them. The "fading" of adolescents' sense of meaning is mainly manifested in the following four aspects.

Firstly, they feel that life is boring (including considering "learning" as an important theme in adolescent life, which is also boring). A survey conducted by the Psychological Health Education and Counseling Center of Peking University shows that 30.4% of first-year students, including undergraduate and graduate students, dislike learning or believe that learning is meaningless; 40.4% of students believe that life is meaningless and that living is just following someone else's logic, with the most extreme being giving up on oneself. [4] When adolescents feel that doing anything is meaningless, it indicates that their sense of meaning is losing and their mental state is beginning to become depressed.

Secondly, there is a strong and overwhelming emotional suppression. Emotional suppression is a negative feeling caused by the inability to express emotions and control power, often leading to feelings of low mood, lack of interest in things, and physiological reactions such as chest tightness, palpitations, fatigue, and weakness. Emotional suppression can lead to depression, apathy, confusion, pain, loneliness, and frustration, ultimately resulting in self doubt, denial, and disdain. For example, some adolescents believe that "they are always inferior

to others", "they cannot do anything well", "they are just useless or stupid", "no matter how they behave, they will not receive recognition or praise from their parents, teachers, or classmates", and so on. When some adolescents often exhibit emotional suppression, it indicates that their sense of meaning loss is worsening.

Thirdly, there is a lack of direction towards real-life issues. "At a loss" is mainly manifested as four symptoms. The first is mental stress disorder, characterized by high mental pressure and lack of concentration. The second is depression, manifested as low mood, decreased interest, lack of energy, etc., which may lead to a loss of enthusiasm and care for life. The third is anxiety disorder, characterized by anxiety emotions such as tension, palpitations and restlessness, which may lead to a loss of interest in life. The fourth is schizophrenia, characterized by distortions in personal consciousness, perception, emotions, and behavior, which may lead to indifference to life. The fifth is obsessive-compulsive disorder, manifested as repeated thinking, worry, tension, etc., which may also lead to a loss of enthusiasm for life. When some adolescents show a sense of helplessness towards real-life problems, it indicates that they have developed a psychological rejection reaction towards the outside world due to the loss of meaning, as well as a behavioral stress response towards the outside world.

Fourthly, not cherishing life. Due to insufficient awareness of the preciousness of life, some adolescents are prone to experiencing pessimistic, decadent, disillusioned, and suicidal emotions after setbacks. If not eliminated in a timely manner, it will have incalculable consequences. There are often reports in the media about young people jumping off buildings to commit suicide, and the bloody fact of adolescents' suicide is lamentable. According to the survey data of the 2022 China Youth Suicide Report, an average of 100000 teenagers die from suicide every year in China. Among them, depression is a common psychological disorder among adolescents and the leading cause of teenage suicide. A study published in the official journal of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, China CDC Weekly, showed that the suicide rate of children aged 5 to 14 increased from about 0.2 per 100000 people to about 0.8 per 100000 people between 2010 and 2021, doubling the suicide rate. Life is the most precious, and when some teenagers show words and actions that do not cherish life, it indicates that their sense of meaning has been severely lost and is in danger.

The reasons for the problem of teenagers' sense of meaning "fading" are multifaceted, summarized as follows.

Firstly, there is excessive academic pressure. The pressure of course learning and entrance exams often leaves some students breathless and causes various negative impacts. In terms of learning attitude, some adolescents adopt a perfunctory attitude towards learning, being bored with supervision, complain about too much homework, lack confidence in academic performance, etc. Manifested in exams, it is easy to experience anxiety and insomnia before exams. In terms of learning behavior, they intentionally procrastinate or perfunctory, frequently copying classmates' homework or intentionally not completing homework, and even getting bored, angry, irritable, or crying while doing homework. In terms of relationships with parents, there may be tension due to academic issues, resistance towards parents, or frequent conflicts with parents. In terms of psychological state, they are overly concerned about their grades and feel irritable and frustrated when they are surpassed, and dislike their parents' inquiries and supervision of their studies.

Secondly, the living environment is not friendly. An unfriendly living environment can have a profound impact on the meaning of life for adolescents, causing them to pay more attention to themselves and less attention to others, lacking confidence and courage to deal with problems. As Adler believed, the three negative states of "physiological defects", "being spoiled or indulged" and "being ignored or neglected" can cause adolescents to have deviations in understanding society and adapting to life, forming unhealthy lifestyles and producing incorrect meanings in life. The unfriendly living environment is due to family reasons, such as

some adolescents being only children and being spoiled from a young age. As the pressure of studying increases, they are often criticized and scolded, which can easily cause psychological differences. At the same time, there are also reasons related to schools, such as under the guidance of grades and further education as the "baton" of school work, schools and teachers only focus on students' grades and neglect their happy and healthy growth. In addition, there are also social reasons, such as excessive social pressure on employment, which ultimately targets and is borne by young people.

Thirdly, there is a lack of channels for emotional relief. The emotional changes of some adolescents often fail to attract the attention of parents and teachers, and they also fail to receive psychological assistance from professional institutions and personnel. Their negative emotions are not relieved in a timely manner, and they lack the necessary cooperation skills and coping measures when facing learning and life problems. As a result, they choose to escape from real problems and cannot adapt to real social life.

Fourthly, there is a serious lack of life education. Due to insufficient emphasis on life education by parents and schools, and a lack of life education curriculum, adolescents generally lack awareness of the meaning and value of life, and do not know how to cherish their own and others' lives. Due to the lack of a correct outlook on life, some adolescents may experience psychological abnormalities and pathologies when their psychological problems are not resolved, leading them to resort to extreme methods such as self harm, suicide, and killing others to solve the problems they face.

4. The Cultivation Path of Adolescents' Sense of Meaning

Positive psychology believes that it is necessary to study people's positive qualities, pay attention to their survival and development, discover the positive factors that contribute to the good development of individuals, groups, and society, and use these positive factors to enhance people's health and happiness, thereby promoting the healthy development of society. How to cultivate adolescents' sense of meaning? Obtaining positive emotional experiences, positive life cognition, positive social environment creation, and positive psychological intervention are the main paths to cultivating adolescents' sense of meaning.

The one is to gain positive emotional experiences. Positive emotions are positive emotions with positive value, which are a feeling and experience when making progress or receiving positive evaluations from others in the process of achieving goals. Generally speaking, positive emotions include joy, contentment, interest, pride, gratitude, love, and so on. Among them, optimistic emotions are the most important for adolescents. Optimists' firm beliefs and expectations for a better future can effectively ensure the rapid resolution of problems and the achievement of goals, thereby dispelling sources of tension and promoting the adjustment of physical and mental states. If adolescents can gain positive emotional experiences in their daily learning and life, such as receiving recognition and praise for every progress in their studies and completing every task within their abilities, they will gain satisfaction and happiness, feel love, and thus generate a psychological motivation. Positive emotional experiences can be transformed into psychological motivation, radiating spiritual strength, and helping to maintain the physical and mental health of adolescents and improve their quality of life.

The second is to promote positive life cognition. As early as 1968, American author James Donald Walters first explicitly proposed the concept of life education. From the perspective of positive psychology, the essence of life education is to "maintain life with the correct attitude". For adolescents, the purpose of life education is to encourage them to form positive life cognition. To achieve positive life cognition among adolescents, on the one hand, it is necessary to cultivate their healthy life awareness. Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle once said, "Life consciousness is an individual's understanding and attitude towards life." [6] Through family

education, school classroom education, themed class activities, and social practice activities, young people are made aware that life is precious, and therefore should cherish their own life and respect the lives of others. On the other hand, it is important to cultivate a sense of meaning in life among young people. The so-called sense of meaning in life refers to the feeling that an individual feels their life can be understood, guided by valuable goals, and feels that life is valuable. [7] Through a variety of family, school, and social activities, young people can discover and establish their connection with society, guide them to discover their social support system, discover the beauty and preciousness of life, and discover the meaning and value of themselves to others and society. This promotes the awakening of their life consciousness, enhances their ability to acquire life energy, and ultimately leads to a genuine love, cherish and development of life. The significance of positive life cognition lies in guiding young people to understand, respect, and love life, so that they can learn to respect themselves while accommodating differences, pay attention to themselves while caring for others, and embrace society. Ultimately, they will understand the meaning of life and actively create life value, building a positive outlook on life and values.

The third is to create a positive social environment. A positive social environment is composed of families, schools, and society. Firstly, a positive family environment is to construct a democratic and relaxed family atmosphere, which encourages young people to maintain a happy and positive attitude. Among them, parents must take on the primary responsibility. Parents who fail to recognize the importance of respecting and protecting their children, fail to provide them with warm care of love, but instead of spoiling or indulging, neglecting or disregarding children, are derelict in their duties. Secondly, a positive school environment is the main field for cultivating a sense of meaning among adolescents, as they spend most of their time in school. Carrying out rich and colorful campus cultural activities, establishing good teacher-student relationships, and creating a comfortable, safe, and positive campus environment can provide a solid and good cultural environment foundation for creating a sense of meaning for young people. The construction of a positive school environment is jointly responsible by the education administrative department, school leaders, and teachers. Finally, a positive social environment constantly influences the formation of a sense of meaning among adolescents. American educator John Dewey proposed that the process of education is a continuous process of growth. Life is development, and continuous development and growth is life. Therefore, the best education is to learn from life and experience. The negative impact of social environment is a direct factor causing the lack of sense of meaning among adolescents. In this regard, it is the joint responsibility of the state, government, social organizations, and groups to curb negative social phenomena such as forgetting justice for personal gain, pursuing profit only, resisting fraud, abusing power for personal gain, and indulging in pleasure on young people.

The fourth is to engage in positive psychological intervention. Due to the loss of meaning, some adolescents may experience negative psychological problems or illnesses. At this time, psychological intervention is needed. Psychological intervention refers to the planned and systematic application of influence on the psychological activities, personality traits, or psychological problems of adolescents under the guidance of psychological theories and professional skills, in order to induce changes towards expected goals. The means of psychological intervention include psychological health centers, psychological counselors, and psychologists providing psychological counseling, psychotherapy, psychological rehabilitation, and psychological crisis intervention. This is an effective way to ensure that adolescents regain meaning. This is an effective way to ensure that adolescents regain meaning. Sense of meaning is an effective protective factor for adolescent problematic behavior. Therefore, enhancing individuals' sense of meaning in life, promoting social connections, and strengthening psychological resilience, which has a positive promoting effect on adolescent mental health.

5. Conclusion

Human existence always involves meaning, which is an inherent pursuit of human beings. No one can survive without meaning. For adolescents, a sense of meaning is the intrinsic driving force behind their creative activities and also the compass for their future lives. Because of the cultivation of a sense of meaning, adolescents can become healthy, complete, and well-rounded individuals. Positive psychology provides scientific support for cultivating a sense of meaning in adolescents. How to pay attention to the current problem of lack of meaning among teenagers from the perspective of positive psychology, and provide constructive guidance for cultivating their sense of meaning, so that they can obtain positive emotional experiences, promote positive life cognition, create a positive social environment, and carry out positive psychological interventions, has become an important issue in the era of moral education.

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