HOW MEANING MATTERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Presented by Adelyn B. Shimizu, Colorado State University
INTRODUCTION

- Counseling psychology PhD student
  CSU
- Occupational health psychology
  training concentration
- MAP ERC trainee
- Research focus on positive psychology
  applications within the workplace
MEANING

- **Meaning in life** is defined as “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence” (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81).
- Normally used to connate *positive* cognitive and affective appraisals.
Meaning is a basic human need\(^1\) and is essential for psychological health.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Frankl, 1963; \(^2\) e.g. King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 1998
MEANING AS A “NOTABLE RESOURCE”¹

Increased meaning in life associated with…

• Greater wellbeing and less psychological distress²
• Better post-trauma adjustment³
• Better health⁴
• …and decreased chance of death!⁵

¹Steger & Samman, 2012; ²e.g., Steger et al., 2006; ³Steger, Frazier, et al., 2008; ⁴Steger, Mann, Michels, & Cooper, 2009; ⁵Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009
WORKERS NEED MEANINGFUL WORK

• Meaning at work is an integrative aspect of worker’s overall well-being and health.¹
• Finding meaning in the domain of work also helps fulfill the global need for meaning in life.²

¹ e.g. Dik, Byrne & Steger, 2013; Harpaz & Fu, 2002 ² Steger & Dik, 2010
(A FEW OF THE) WORK BENEFITS

• Linked to greater job satisfaction.\(^1\)
• Identifying and expressing one’s strengths and talents at work linked to increased productivity.\(^2\)
• Decreased mental health concerns in workers (e.g., low self-esteem and anxiety).\(^3\)
• Meaningful work acts as mediator between transformational leadership and psychological well-being.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Kamdron, 2005; Sparks & Schenk, 2001; \(^2\) Hodges & Clifton, 2004; \(^3\) Deci et al., 2001; \(^4\) Arnold et al., 2007
So increased meaning is good for workers… How do I help them increase their sense of meaningful work?
CHANGE JOBS?

Sometimes an option for career counselors to suggest, less often one for those in occupational health to suggest…
JOB CRAFTING\textsuperscript{1}

- Three identified avenues that workers can possibly take; 1) cognitive, 2) social, and 3) task
- These three also offer potential pathways occupational health and safety professionals may want to consider

\textsuperscript{1}Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013
COGNITIVE

- Reframing work to focus on meaningful (often prosocial) impact
- Expanding, focusing, linking perceptions
SOCIAL

Building, reframing, and adapting relationships at work
TASK

- Adding tasks
- Emphasizing tasks
- Redesigning tasks
THE WORK **YOU** DO IMPACTS WORKERS

But in more ways than you may normally consider…
THE HAWTHORNE EFFECT

Workers (sometimes) appraised interventions as their organization caring enough about them to try and make a positive change.
BROAD IMPLICATIONS

1. Intentionally target increasing meaningful work.

2. Make sure not to decrease the sense of meaningful work unintentionally.
SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Examples…

• Can act as an additional resource for some workers
• Worker’s perceived importance and practice of safety procedures and equipment
• Likelihood of effective intervention implementation
• Having a conversation about the meaningfulness of work can act as a repertoire builder
A CHALLENGE

Intentionally try to make your interactions with workers such that it will increase their perceptions of meaningfulness of their work; no matter the job, what you have been tasked with doing, or the specific worksite.
THANK YOU!

Questions? Email adelyn.shimizu@colostate.edu