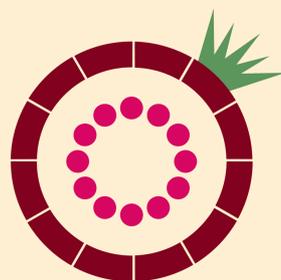


Re-make Meaning

Finding meaning in times of challenge
and crisis

Christina Baird PhD





Has The World Gone Crazy?

Pandemics, invasions, lockdowns, cyclones and protests. Are you starting to feel like the world has gone crazy? It is easy to feel a little on edge, unsettled and anxious. Or perhaps you are what we call languishing, just feeling like your well-being isn't as robust as it normally is. It is common to feel a little lost and dis-oriented as a result of all the challenges and changes that Covid has brought us. You may be noticing things like you don't care about the same things that you used to, or perhaps you notice that you are more pessimistic, frustrated and sensitive than you used to be.

We have been through some difficult times and it hasn't left us unchanged.



We have been through some difficult times and it hasn't left us unchanged. It is easy to search out there for the answers, but you know the cliches that are so often offered aren't going to cut it. Reality is way too complex for that. The answers are not out there, and the answers won't be the same for all of us. Reflection, curiosity and understanding may help you find the stability that you need. You long for a little certainty and predictability, but you wonder if things will ever be the same again. Perhaps things won't be the same again, but you can build your understanding and resilience to hold the uncertainty and disorientation that we face well.

"There are multiple and sometimes unexpected pathways to resilience"
George Bonanno



Why Are People Unsettled?

To manage ourselves well through this time of uncertainty it can help to have some insight around some of the unconscious processes that are involved. No-one likes a crisis. The pandemic has dragged out into a long-term challenge, providing many different threats to our well-being, and there have been many other challenges along the way. One of the key ways it unsettles us is that it destabilises our big ideas about how the world works. The gap between our unconscious ideas and beliefs about the world and the reality of something like the pandemic is huge.



To have your basic systems of meaning challenged by reality is a very scary and insecure place to be.

This instigates many questions about what is true and creates the doubt that we know the world that we live in anymore. This is all happening at an unconscious level of thinking and we are often not aware that this is causing our restlessness. To have our basic systems of meaning challenged by reality is a very scary and insecure place to be, as the world is no longer predictable in any way, and without the predictability it is harder for our brains to keep us safe and secure.

Humans are sense makers. We were designed to understand and to make sense of the world around us and we have an innate motivation to find meaning in life (Frankl,1959). Making sense, organising, categorising, striving for understanding help us predict us what will happen next and allows us to stay safe and connected.

"Growing numbers of the workforce feel they are getting less enjoyment from their work."

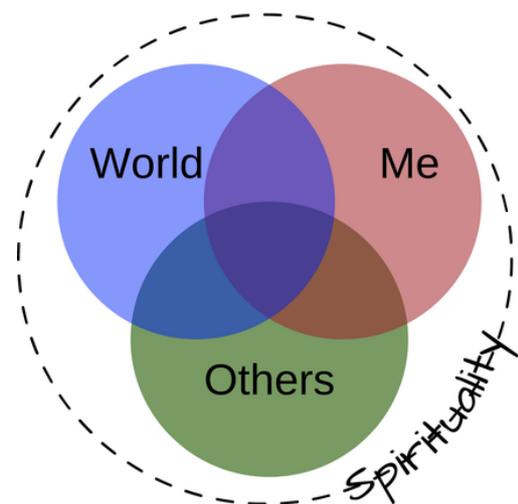
Jarrood Haar



How People Make Meaning

From our earliest days as babies we are processing our experiences and forming ideas and beliefs about how the world works, our place in it and what we can expect from others. The sense we make from our experiences can be as simple as a belief that we can ask others for help whenever we need it. Alternatively our ideas and beliefs can be as complex as ideas about the creation of the universe. Our systems of meaning are wide and varied and serve as a framework for living. They provide unconscious guidance for how to navigate through this world that we live in. Across our lifespan we are continually striving to make meaning or sense out of all we experience.

There are three main areas in which we make meaning, how the world works, who we are and how to relate to others.



There are three main areas in which we make meaning, how the world works, who we are and how to relate to others. The spiritualities that we are exposed to form a background to this process of meaning making, adding in a bit of structure and encouraging us to think of the big picture in which we find ourselves.

As an example, as I grew up my questions were always validated and my parents showed me how to find answers to the many questions that I had in books, encyclopaedias or at the library. From these experiences the meaning system that I developed was that the world was somewhere to be explored, and I was someone who could actively seek and find answers about anything. Others were partners in curiosity who would also enjoy seeking and questioning and reveling in all that there was to be discovered. I also believed that all could be explained through one of the twin lenses of faith or science. These beliefs served me quite well until I started to come across things that couldn't actually be understood, to have questions to which I couldn't find satisfactory answers.

"Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations." Alfred Adler



Crisis Destabilises Our Systems Of Meaning

We can go along quite happily for some time adding to these systems of meaning, perhaps tweaking some of them slightly, and creating quite a nice feedback loop that confirms our ideas. For example if we believe people will help us, we become more likely to ask for help and actually receive more help, which confirms our belief in other people's helpfulness. We develop a feeling of confidence in our beliefs and they provide a sense of stability and the predictability that we crave, because it creates safety and security.

The experience of a crisis - whether on a personal level such as losing a loved one or a more global experience such as a pandemic or natural disaster, challenges these systems of meaning. Often the reality that we are faced with in crisis, the reality of pain and suffering is inconsistent with the frames of meaning that we have previously built. This is especially true if our meaning systems did not contain frameworks for understanding pain and suffering. The dissonance between what we previously believed and how the world actually is, creates fear and discomfort. We may feel that we can no longer predict how the world works, and we no longer understand how everything hangs together.

SYSTEMS OF MEANING

SECURITY OF MEANING	REACTIONS AND RESPONSES
Secure	Comfortable
Settled	Confident
Shaky	Restless
Insecure	Confused

Crisis

"Building meaning is the key to flourishing when experiencing suffering."
Daryl Van Tongeren and Sara Showalter Van Tongeren



Crisis Destabilises Our Systems Of Meaning

In this stage of year three of the pandemic we are in a state of dis-orientation where we realise our old systems of sense-making are not big enough to contain the reality of our experience. This can cause unease that makes us long to go back to how things were before the pandemic (or other stressor) began. This might confuse you as its not like things were perfect back then - but things were known, certain and had a certain degree of predictability about them.

Things are not going to return to the same as they were before our period of struggle instead we enter a phase where we have made new sense of the world.



We long for the certainty and stability that we once had. But the way through this time, through our distress is not back to a time of certainty. Rather it is to learn to hold ourselves kindly and support ourselves in the uncertainty. It is by walking into uncertainty that we find a sense of ourselves and our place in the world again.

Walter Brueggemann gives us useful terms to use for this process, describing the initial phase when we are secure in our beliefs and ideas about ourselves and the world as orientation. He describes the phase when things no longer make sense as disorientation, finally we are able to move into a new phase called re-orientation where we once again are able to make new meaning and sense of all that has occurred and is occurring. After the phase of dis-orientation we don't move backwards into orientation, things are not going to return to the same as they were before our period of struggle instead we enter a phase where we have made new sense of the world.

"Much of the richness of the human striving for meaning remains unexplored."
Michael Steger



7 Tips For Living With Disorientation

Research indicates that meaning making in the face of struggle is positively related to a variety of indicators of well-being (for example Steger, 2018, and Van Tongeren & Showalter-Van Tongeren, 2021). So part of taking care of ourselves in this time of uncertainty is to embrace activities that will help us find and uncover meaning. Being in disorientation can be uncomfortable. It is tempting to want to make the distress and confusion go away. But often the first step is to unpack the disorientation, to open up to it a little so that we can be curious about it, so that we can learn about the meaning that we are making of our experiences. Once we have accepted and understood our disorientation we can begin to find the paths of new sense-making and new ways to find meaning once more.

Here are 7 tips for supporting yourself to find meaning in the face of crisis.



The first step is to unpack the disorientation, to open up to it a little so that we can be curious about it.

1) Know that it is normal.

If this is your first experience of disorientation you can feel very alone in your struggle. It can be really hard to find the words to describe your confusion and how you feel. This means that it is difficult to share what you are going through with others. Be reassured that this is a normal response to challenging circumstances. You probably have many worries and fears and sources of distress and these are all appropriate reactions to a very abnormal situation.

"Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is." Kristin Neff



7 Tips For Living With Disorientation

2) Develop self-compassion

Sometimes (especially when we are in distress) we can become quite self-judgemental. You know the approach “don’t be so silly, pull yourself together.” It is not easy to be warm and kind in your inner dialogue, but with practice it does get easier. Practice being with yourself in the same way that your best friend is supportive of you. When you get lost in your big feelings or distress, practice ways that help you manage these feelings, coming back to the present moment, restorative yoga, walking in nature, a cool cloth on your face, or slow breathing. It might take a bit of experimenting to find what works best for you. Accompany these actions with kind words, that acknowledge your emotions.

Practice being with yourself in the same way that your best friends is supportive of you.



3) Be present

Be willing to sit in the discomfort, try to let go of hurry and self-judgement. Allow what comes up to come up, approach it with curiosity and self-compassion. Don’t rush yourself towards answers. Make space to identify your own emotions, reactions and struggles. Consider the meaning that you are making out of your experiences, how are you interpreting and talking about what it happening. Observe the self-stories about your ability to cope that are being excavated by these experiences. Be curious about your reactions and what they tell you about what is important to you, what you value and the sources of meaning in your life.

“Meaning is comprised of coherence, significance, and purpose.”
Daryl Van Tongeren and Sara Showalter Van Tongeren



7 Tips For Living With Disorientation

4) Search for clarity not solutions

We are largely unaware of our drive towards and the process of making meaning. So when your ability to make meaning, or the meaning that you have made is challenged it can be difficult to understand the source of your discomfort and struggle. Try to understand more about your systems of meaning, make space to consider how you see your role in the world and the way the world works. Reflect on how they are being challenged by your experiences. Journal to explore what you believe about pain, suffering, how the world works, your spiritual understandings and your identity.



Most people walk through this darkness to finding new meaning and a new sense of themselves.

5) Be hopeful

There is hope. Most people walk through this time of struggle and do find new meaning and a new sense of themselves. It won't always feel this heavy and burdensome. Sometimes questions suddenly resolve themselves or the resolution may be to realise that you no longer need the answers to those particular questions. Be on the look out for signs of hope, and moments of peace that do occur. You may find that hearing other people's stories of how they have moved through periods of disorientation is encouraging for you.

"I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light."

Barbara Brown Taylor

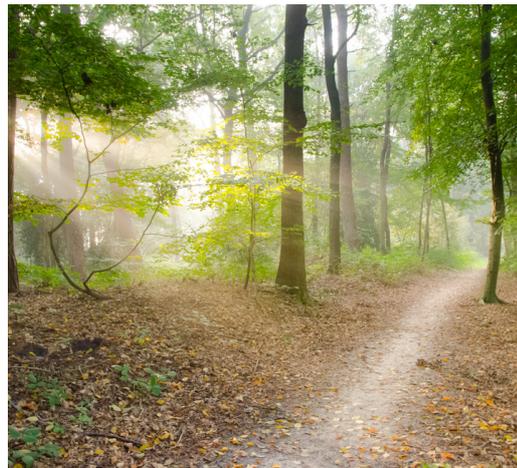


7 Tips For Living With Disorientation

6) Focus on the present

The frequent changes and cancellations that we have experienced in the last few years have made it very hard to plan. These experiences can lead to an apathy about planning anything, which can leave us isolated and lacking in meaning and richness. This is beginning to resolve but we still seem to have some unpredictability about our plans. It is helpful to learn to be spontaneous to be able to be present in what today offers. Activities are a way that we express our identity, being able to do the things that make you feel most like you will be supportive in this time of disorientation. Focus on things that you can do that are small and frequent rather than waiting for the big and occasional events.

Allow meaning to find you rather than approaching it as desperately seeking a cure for your sense of disorientation.



7) Connect to meaning

Be curious about the meaningful areas of your life. What did you used to do in the past that felt most meaningful? What made these activities meaningful? There could be activities that you haven't tried for sometime that you could add back into your life. These could involve meeting with friends for deep conversations, it could be places that are awe inspiring, religious texts, rituals, ceremonies or prayers. Treat these as experiments rather than solutions, approach them with curiosity. Explore those that have resonance further. Be alert to changes and put yourself in places where you can discover new sources of meaning. Allow meaning to find you rather than approaching it as desperately seeking a cure for your sense of disorientation.

"Life has and never ceases to have meaning, from the first moment through to the very last." Victor Frankl



Introducing Christina

Hi I am Christina I am passionate about helping people-helpers uncover wisdom and vitality. I am a psychologist and have a GradDip in Theology. My experience sitting with the big questions of life comes from working with young adults beginning to establish their own adult beliefs and worldviews, and from working with palliative care patients and their families.

I work best in the interactions, the interaction between theology and psychology, the interaction between positive psychology and existential distress, the interactions between systems and individuals. You can imagine if you like that I am the grout between the paving stones, filling the spaces, ensuring things stay balanced and keeping everything together so that it creates a firm level path.

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