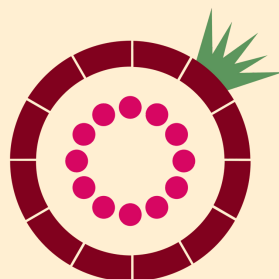


# When the world stops making sense:

Supporting people to re-orient to meaning in  
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? The people you work with are likely to be on edge, unsettled and anxious. You may hear them say things like “I don’t understand what is happening in the world today” or perhaps they are just grumpy and reluctant to support any changes or new ways of doing things that you are trying to introduce. It has been a difficult task leading this group of strugglers through the pandemic, through all the changes, connecting online and in person and back again.

You want to support yourself and the people you care for through this crisis.



You can see that many of the people you work with are feeling lost and don’t know what is going to happen next, or what to do. You may notice that people are responding with “I don’t care,” more and more, or that their involvement in attending events and activities is reducing. They may just be more pessimistic and frustrated than ever before. They look to you to help support them in understanding what is happening with the world and why they feel so lost. You are tempted to just provide them with the cliched black and white answers, to comfort them with the certainty that they long for. But deep down you know that cliches aren’t big enough to support them through the challenge that is the global pandemic. You probably feel a little lost yourself, after all you have lived through all these struggles too, and you too are wondering why the world seems crazy. You want to support yourself and the people you care for through this crisis but you need the easy answers as time and thinking space are pretty scarce. Read on for a quick guide to why people are feeling so lost and what you can do to support them through this time.

“There are multiple and sometimes unexpected pathways to resilience”  
George Bonanno



## Why Are People Unsettled?

To support people through this time of uncertainty it helps to understand some of the unconscious processes that are involved. No-one likes a crisis. The pandemic has dragged out into a longterm challenge, providing many different threats to peoples well-being, and there have been many other challenges along the way. One of the key ways it unsettles those we care for is that it destabilises their big ideas about how the world works. The gap between their unconscious ideas and beliefs about the world and the reality of something like the pandemic is huge. This instigates many questions about what is true and creates the doubt that they know what's what.



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

This is all happening at an unconscious level of thinking and many people are not aware that this is what is causing their restlessness. To have your basic systems of meaning challenged by reality is a very scary and insecure place to be, as the world is no longer predictable in anyway, and it is harder to keep yourself 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, two big goals that keep our brain calm.

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

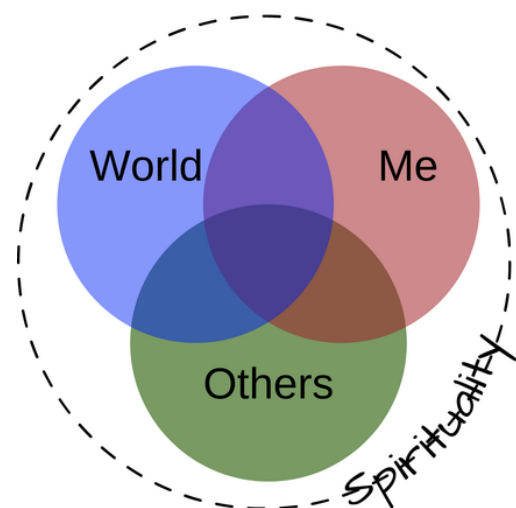
Jarrod Haar



## 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 revelling 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

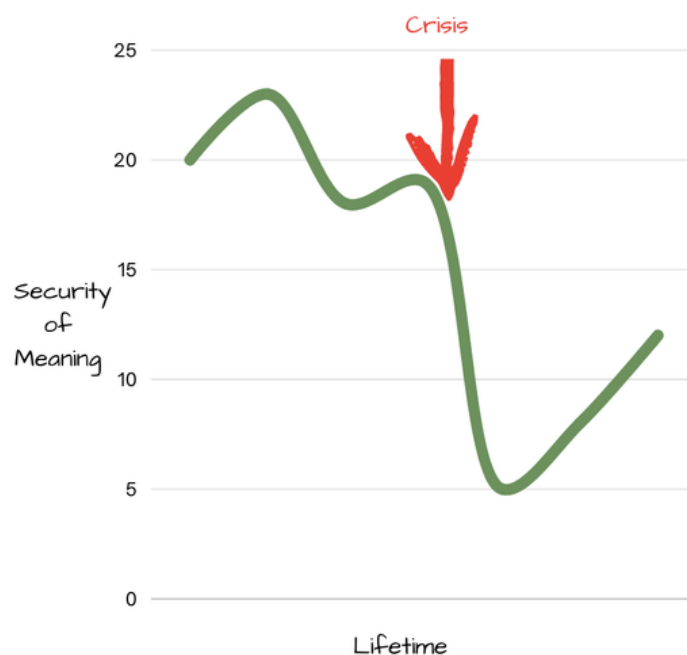


# Crisis Destabilises Our Systems Of Meaning

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.

## SECURITY OF SYSTEMS OF MEANING



"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 entering year three of the pandemic people are in a state of dis-orientation, they realise their old systems of sense-making are not big enough to contain the reality of their experience. As we work to support people in this stage it can be tempting to try and help people to go back, to return to being certain and having predictability. But the way through the distress of uncertainty is through not back. Walter Brueggemann gives us useful terms to use for this process, describing the initial phase when people are secure in their beliefs and ideas about themselves and the world as *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.



Brueggemann describes the phase of destabilisation when things no longer make sense as *disorientation*. He describes the next phase as new orientation (I prefer reorientation). In this phase we have made sense of our experiences and beliefs and made new systems of meaning. It is important to note that after the phase of dis-orientation we don't move back 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 created new systems of meaning.

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 it is important to support and nudge the people we care for towards activities that will help them uncover meaning in their lives. We need to acknowledge that it can be uncomfortable for us to be supporting people who are in disorientation. We need to become comfortable making space for their distress and confusion, without the desire to quickly fix them. It is only once we have met and supported them in disorientation that we can begin to coach them towards pathways of sense-making and finding meaning once more.

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





## 8 Tips To Support People To Uncover Meaning

Here are eight tips for how to best support people to find meaning in the face of crisis.

### 1) *Begin With Yourself*

We have lived through these recent struggles too, and so our own systems of meaning have been destabilised and challenged. When we support others their questions and struggles can touch the areas where we are vulnerable and confused, this can increase our sense of discomfort. Taking the time to identify the areas where this may happen in advance can help prepare you to continue with empathy rather than become defensive. Taking the opportunity to talk about your own emotions, reactions and struggles to make meaning at supervision will assist you to separate between your own struggles and pain and those of the people you are supporting.



Provide plenty of validation of their concerns and worries and fears.

### 2) *Make It Normal*

If this is people's first experience of disorientation they can feel very alone in their struggle. They can struggle to find the words to describe their confusion and how they are feeling. The result of this is that they may not share what they are going through with many people. It can be reassuring for them to know that their experience is shared by many others, that it is a very normal response to challenging circumstances. Provide plenty of validation of their concerns and worries and fears, and lots of reassurance that these are normal shared experiences.

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



## 8 Tips to Support People To Uncover Meaning

### 3) *Be Present*

The simplest thing you have to offer those who are struggling with disorientation is simply your presence, and that is a powerful tool. Be willing to sit with them confidently and calmly being fully with their pain and struggle without hurry or judgement. It is tempting to try and fix their problems, to offer black and white answers, or to try and hurry the people we are supporting into finding new sources of meaning. But actually people just need you to be a comforting presence allowing them to express their emotions, their confusion and their feelings of loss.

The people you are caring for may not understand the source of their discomfort and struggle.



### 4) *Provide Clarity*

We are largely unaware of our motivation and process of making meaning. So the people you are caring for may not understand the source of their discomfort and struggle. Provide them with some clarity and understanding of the processes. Explain how we create systems of meaning around how the world works and who we are and how we find belonging with others, and how the reality of crisis destabilises these ideas. Think up some good starting questions, that help people think through their systems of meaning. These questions could enquire about how they understood the world, God, pain and suffering before the pandemic and how they understand them now. You could ask them questions about how they saw themselves before the pandemic and how that might have changed.

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





## 8 Tips to Support People To Uncover Meaning

### 5) *Offer Hope*

We need to be able to walk into people's distress open and accepting of their emotions, but also offering them hope. This can be a tricky balance to achieve. Knowing that this is a process and that most people walk through this darkness to finding new meaning and a new sense of themselves can be reassuring. Consider sensitively sharing stories of how yourself or others you know have wrestled through your difficult times. Focus on how they (or you) found hope in the struggle and the fact that they reached a new sense of peace. Ensure that these stories are not shared in a way that sounds like they have the 'answer'. Look for glimmers and spots of hope and highlight them as the person you are caring for shares their feelings and areas of suffering.



Most people walk through  
this darkness to finding  
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sense of themselves.

### 6) *Encourage A 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 unfortunately can leave us isolated and lacking in meaning and richness. Encourage those you are supporting to focus on the present moment, rather than rushing to the future which can cause anxiety because of the lack of predictability. Support them to think of things that they can do today to help them feel connected to their self, their beliefs and others. Help them focus on small and regular moments, rather than waiting for big and less frequent moments.

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

Barbara Brown Taylor

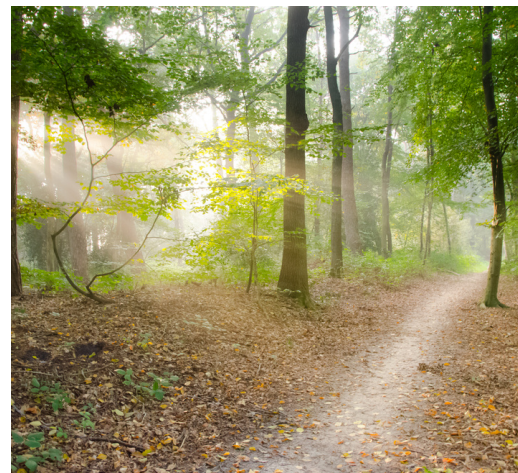


## 8 Tips to Support People To Uncover Meaning

### 7) *Connect People To Meaning*

Start to explore where the sources of meaning are in the persons life. Be curious about where and what they were doing in the past that felt most meaningful to them, explore how they knew these were meaningful and what made these activities or events meaningful for them. In your role consider what connections to meaning you can offer. These don't have to all be about talking, you may like to offer places, religious texts, books, rituals, prayers, sacraments or ceremonies. Present these as options to try rather than a sure solution. Walk with the person you are supporting to develop curiosity about which ones have most resonance for them, and why.

People are searching for help to make sense of their world, we can accompany them on this journey.



### 8) *Follow New Paths*

Begin to accompany and nudge the person you are supporting to find new paths towards meaning. This journey will require lots of patience and experimentation, follow the other person's lead and become a good meaning spotter. Listen to how and what they say and point out changes and movements in their journey that represent new meaning that they are making of their experiences. Part of this journey is learning to live with a new sense of complexity, to be ok with uncertainty, and to grow ideas large enough to hold the reality we have experienced.

### *In Conclusion*

People are searching for help to make sense of their world, we can accompany them on this journey to achieving a new orientation that will be large enough to encompass all they have experienced.

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



## When The World Stops Making Sense: A workshop to remake meaning in the face of crisis

Do you want to go one step further than providing individual support to those who are lost and trying to make sense of all that is happening?  
Host a facilitated workshop for your team, group or organisation.

In the workshop we will work together to create a safe supportive space for self-expression of beliefs and emotions. Formal training presentations to enhance understanding will be mixed with discussion and sharing. We will begin to experiment and explore how creative expressions such as journaling, art and symbolism can support us to remake meaning in ways that increase our ability to thrive in the middle of crisis. It is suitable for teams, small groups and anyone who feels that their usual systems of meaning are no longer providing an adequate frame for their 'lived-through-a-pandemic reality.'



Knowing where we are  
and what is happening is  
the first step to begin to  
find the paths of where we  
need to go.

More information on the When The World Stops Making Sense Workshop is available on my website ([use this link to find the brochure](#)).

Or contact me to discuss your needs

Christina@breadandpomegranates.com

"Small as we are in the big scheme of universe and time, each of us is a little mechanism that keeps the whole wheel spinning. And what will we power with the wheel of our own life?" Edith Eger



## 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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