11
Perceived Life Significance Scale (PLSS)

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Purpose

Much research in recent years has identified the importance of meaning as an element of recovery from significant loss. The majority of models and measures of meaning have focused on meaning as "sense-making"; in other words, as an effort to integrate the loss with coherent and positive narratives about world and self (e.g., Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park & Folkman, 1997). In contrast, a recent literature review identified a distinct conceptualization of meaning as *life significance*: the perception of value associated with a goal, relationship, or aspect of life experience that exists or is pursued in the present and future (Hibberd, 2013). Life significance is what is meant when we speak of something that "means a lot" to us; it is intrinsically, transcendently, existentially valued. For example, experiences such as watching one's young children play soccer, working hard on a political or activism project, writing a book, or watching the sunset may produce feelings of life significance.

Qualitative research and theoretical models suggest that life significance may be an important and by no means guaranteed outcome in grief recovery, as individuals strive to identify what "matters" when an important relationship is fundamentally altered (Armour, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wheeler, 2001). Bereavement may strip a mourner of important life roles (e.g., parent, wife), and significant moments may seem empty in the absence of someone with whom to share them (Hershberger & Walsh, 1990). Confrontation with death also brings issues of significance to the forefront; individuals may question the point of living at all, or a renewed awareness of life's scarcity may produce a sense of appreciation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The Perceived Life Significance Scale, a new measure of life significance, seeks to quantify the perceived intrinsic value of one's activities, relationships, and everyday experiences (Hibberd & Vandenberg, in press). In clinical practice, the PLSS can be useful as a measure of change in life significance across a course of therapy, as well as to stimulate discussion of life meaning with grieving clients.

Development

Item content for an initial large pool of potential PLSS items was developed using qualitative data from four focus groups ($N = 31$), specifically focusing on the construct of life significance as described above (Hibberd & Vandenberg, in press). Focus group participants were asked a

number of questions about their experiences of finding "what matters" following bereavement, with particular attention to (a) specific language used by participants to describe meaning, and (b) any distinctions articulated between different sources of meaning (i.e., as relevant to hypothesized subdimensions of life significance).

Item selection, as well as evaluation of the reliability and validity of the final 19-item Perceived Life Significance Scale, was conducted in two phases with two different samples. Selection of items for the final 19-item PLSS scale (from the initial large item pool generated by focus groups, described above), as well as exploratory factor analyses to identify potential subscales, involved an ethnically diverse group of bereaved undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university ($N = 353$). Analyses confirming the factor structure of the scale, as well as examining its validity with respect to other measures, was conducted with a separate sample of community bereaved adults ($N = 483$). See Table 11.1 for a summary of sample demographics and PLSS mean scores.

Format and Psychometric Properties

The PLSS consists of 19 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale, assessing individuals' perceptions of current life significance. There are three subscales: *Active life significance* (Cronbach's

Table 11.1 Demographic characteristics and mean PLSS scores of community and student samples

Demographic characteristic	Community sample		Student sample	
	N	%	n	%
Marital status				
Married or partnered	184	52	93	14
Widowed	74	21	0	0
Single	57	16	365	76
Divorced or separated	37	11	17	3.5
Ethnicity[a]				
Caucasian	322	91	318	66
Hispanic or Latino/a	8	3	14	3
African-American	6	2	134	28
Asian	8	2	17	3
Other	14	4	11	3
Religious affiliation[a]				
Protestant Christian	92	26	156	32
Catholic	90	26	110	23
Nondenominational Christian	73	21	85	18
Atheist or agnostic	73	22	71	15
Other	20	9	32	7
Gender				
Male	15	4	121	25
Female	330	96	359	75
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age (years)	45.00	12.30	25.30	7.63
Closeness to deceased[b]	6.70	0.83	5.69	1.32
Time since loss (months)	38.57	34.00	46.62	36.72
PLSS total score	**87.33**	**22.22**	**109.26**	**16.88**

[a]Total percentage is greater than 100 due to some participants endorsing multiple categories.
[b]Assessed using a Likert scale with endpoints 1 (not close at all) and 7 (very close).
SD, standard deviation.

α = .95), *Receptive life significance* (α = .70), and *Negative life significance* (α = .93). Specifically, *Active life significance* is derived from intentional pursuit of and engagement with valued activities and goals; this is life significance as the "performative dimension" of meaning (Armour, 2003). Individuals find active life significance in the things they *do*. In contrast, *Receptive life significance* involves a more passive appreciation of beautiful or special life experiences, as described by individuals who report a greater awareness of the value of everyday life after becoming aware of life's finitude (Wheeler, 2001). Individuals find receptive life significance in the things they *experience*. The *Negative life significance* subscale is composed entirely of negatively worded items (e.g., "My life is empty;" "I feel disconnected from the world"); thus, this subscale likely reflects a painful awareness of the absence of valued activities and relationships. Total score on the PLSS is calculated by simply adding the sum of all items, after reverse-scoring *Negative life significance* items. Higher PLSS total scores indicate stronger perceived life significance.

Quantitative analyses of the PLSS support the measure's reliability (α = .95 for the full scale), factor stability, and convergent and discriminant validity. The three-factor structure was found to be stable across both the community and student samples, and two of the three subscales correspond closely with hypothesized subdimensions of life significance (Hibberd, 2013). Additionally, the PLSS was found to correlate in expected directions with similar constructs (i.e., strongly and positively with general measures of meaning, and more moderately in a negative direction with constructs unrelated to meaning—grief intensity, depression, negative affect). A joint factor analysis of PLSS items and a commonly used measure of post-loss beliefs (the World Assumptions Scale; Janoff-Bulman, 1989) found better fit for a two-factor model, supporting the proposed distinction between life significance and sense-making. Finally, individuals who report stronger life significance also report greater fulfillment across a variety of domains, as well as more involvement with activities and roles likely to generate meaning (e.g., parenting, volunteering, caregiving).

Clinical Applications

In clinical practice, the PLSS can be used to assess for changes in life significance over the course of therapy by comparing scores across time points. It can be particularly useful when therapist and client share an explicit goal of identifying and pursuing valued experiences or behaviors (e.g., as compared with a shared goal of symptom reduction). Because of its face validity, the measure can also be used as a tool to stimulate discussion with clients about what the intended outcomes of therapy should be, what kinds of significance clients are currently experiencing, and how "what matters" has changed since a shattering loss.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), to provide an example, is a contextual behavioral style of therapy in which life significance (referred to as either "values" or "committed action" within the model) is of primary importance as an outcome of treatment (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011). In an 8-week ACT group for individuals who had experienced a morally injurious loss, the PLSS was used to assess life significance at the beginning and end point of therapy. One group member, Carol, demonstrated a particularly strong treatment response, corresponding with her report at follow-up assessment of a life that felt significantly more vital and engaged. Carol had witnessed the deaths of several civilian children during military service in Bosnia and was haunted by a sense of injustice and horror about these senseless deaths.

During a group exercise in which individuals were prompted to identify the link between the pain of loss and a cherished value, Carol discussed the particular gut response she has to violence perpetrated against children and linked it with a value of care and kindness toward innocent lives. She began to work on putting this value into practice more often during her work as a teacher, actively practicing compassion and perspective-taking when she felt irritated by her students. As she began to see students blossom under this treatment, Carol

described a sense of purpose and satisfaction consistent with the *Active life significance* sub-scale of the PLSS. She also became more connected with the intimacy and meaning available in her present-moment experience, consistent with the *Receptive life significance* subscale. Carol's total PLSS score at the end of the group was 102, close to the average found in our sample of bereaved undergraduates (see Table 11.1) and significantly higher than her score at the beginning of treatment. Discussing this gain with Carol in a follow-up call after the final group session afforded her an opportunity to discuss ways that she can continue to remain connected with the things that matter most in her life.

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Appendix 11.1 Perceived Life Significance Scale

Name: _____

Date: _____

Please respond to each of the following statements by indicating how often, or how completely, each statement is true for you. Use the following scale:

1 = Never/Completely disagree to 7 = Always/Completely agree

1. I feel satisfied and fulfilled by the things I do	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. There's nothing in my life that really matters*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I try to live my life to the fullest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. There are moments when I'm powerfully aware of how valuable life is	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I feel alive and full of vitality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I'm involved in activities that feel rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. My life feels like a waste of time*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I really care about the things I am doing with my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Sometimes something so special or meaningful happens that I get choked up	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I feel I have nothing to live for*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. My life is empty*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. The pain and suffering I've experienced connects me to other people who have also suffered	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Life is too short to waste time on petty things	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. My life feels pointless at times*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. If you look closely, the world is a beautiful place	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. I am energized by the things I want to do in my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I am deeply engaged in my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. I feel disconnected from the world*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. I am an active participant in my own life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

*Reverse-scored.

Subscale	Item numbers
1. Active life significance	1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 16, 17, 19
2. Negative life significance	2, 7, 10, 11, 14, 18
3. Receptive life significance	4, 9, 12, 13, 15

Note: This scale is published in the public domain to encourage its use by interested clinicians and researchers. No formal permission is required for its duplication and use beyond citation of its source and authorship.