

MEANINGFUL LIVING

An guided reflection exercise



JUNE FONG

Preface

Over the years, I have worked with clinically challenging populations who come to me with their deepest, most painful troubles. Many wind up in dire situations because somewhere along the way, they have fallen off their intended course. They start questioning what they have been doing, and if there is any meaning in their lives at all.

This guided exercise is intended for use by anyone who is ready to pause and reflect on where they are going, instead of just blindly running on the treadmill of life. It is not meant to replace therapy or professional mental health advice. Nonetheless, it creates a good starting point for conversations that you might eventually like to have with your therapist, counsellor or treatment provider.

If you feel that you need something more, click on the button below to contact me, and find out if you would benefit from a personalised coaching session.

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Meaningful Living

Picture your life as a sailboat, with you as the captain of this ship.

Let me walk you through the 8 different domains of this sailboat, which we will be using as a metaphor to contemplate the current state of your life.



THE DIFFERENT DOMAINS OF THE SAILBOAT

1. WATER

Just like the water encompasses the space in which the boat is held afloat and moves, this is the direct environment that we live in and interact with. This environment is divided into many different domains, for example; our job, the relationship with our partner, our friends, our financial situation.

2. COMPASS

A compass is an instrument used for navigation and orientation that shows direction relative to the environment. It provides feedback on the current direction in which we are heading. Experiences like feelings, emotions, bodily sensations and intuition serve as a tool for navigation and orientation.

3. STEERING WHEEL

The steering wheel represents personal values. In the same way, the steering wheel determines where the boat will go to, values determine how we want to live our life. They are the answer to the question: what do you find important in life? When we live according to our true values, there is an accompanying sense of fulfilling our deepest purpose in life. Values provide the direction and meaning that we need to lead fulfilling and rewarding lives.

4. LEAK

A leak in the boat represents a weakness: a personal characteristic that reduces well-being. Weaknesses can be present at the physical, cognitive, and/or behavioral level. By fixing the leak, the boat will be able to sail again. Indeed, if we do not fix the leak, then the boat will sink. However, only focusing on repairing the leak of the boat is unlikely to result in success or reaching a destination or goal. In other words, the absence of problems or illness does not automatically imply well-being.

5. SAILS

The sails of the boat represent personal strengths: factors that facilitate valued living and goal achievement and increase personal well-being. Strengths include ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are authentic and energizing to the individual. By hoisting the sails to catch a favorable wind (i.e., opportunity), we can move forward and reach our destinations.

6. WEATHER

The weather can be compared to events in life. Just like we cannot control the weather, both positive and negative events that cannot be controlled will take place. Sometimes the wind is blowing in our sails and we encounter situations that allow us to use our strengths optimally. At other times, the wind and the rain make it difficult to keep traveling in our preferred direction.

7. OTHER BOATS

The other boats in the sea represent the people that surround us. These boats can be compared to our social network. Other boats can influence us in many ways, both positively and negatively, providing support or derailing us

8. DESTINATION

Just like a boat can sail to certain destinations, people can reach goals. While a value is the general direction of the boat, a goal is a specific and concrete destination of the boat. Goal setting and achievement are important processes that can help to concretize values.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following:

1. What is the current status of your sail boat?
2. How would you describe your journey so far?

THE 3 DIMENSIONS OF MEANINGFUL LIVING

When our "sailboat" is not travelling in a direction that is aligned with our values, we may experience a loss of "meaningfulness". Sometimes, despite our best efforts, our sailboat may have drifted in the waters. In order to steer the ship back onto the right path, we have to ask ourselves, what *is* the right path for me? Which path makes the most sense? Which path resonates with my values?

In this reflection, we are going to address *meaning in life*. When we talk about meaning, we are talking about *mattering*. Something that is meaningful to you can be seen as something that matters to you. It is something that you consider to be important, something that gives your life purpose.

DIMENSION #1: THE BREADTH OF MEANING

A *source* of meaning is something in your life that you perceive as meaningful. This can be anything and everything. The specific sources that offer a sense of meaning differ from one individual to another. Some people find meaning in their work, others in their relationships, while others through their faith or belief in a higher power.

What are the most potent sources of meaning that you currently have in your life? In other words, what things matter most to you?

Current source #1

Current source #2

Current source #3

Current source #4

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Let's expand our thinking to include not just current, but past or even untapped sources of meaning. Use the following questions to guide you:

1. Are any of your past sources of meaning no longer a source of meaning in your present life? Or, are there sources of meaning that are not so meaningful to you anymore? If so, which ones, and why?
2. Are any of your past sources of meaning potentially worth investing in again? If so, which ones?
3. Is there a source of meaning that you have never explored but would be curious or willing to explore? For instance, there may be a sport that you have always been fascinated by but have never tried yourself. Or, you may have always loved listening to music but never tried playing an instrument yourself.

DIMENSION #2: THE DEPTH OF MEANING

The depth of meaning refers to the *intensity* of your relationship with a particular source of meaning. Our relationship with some sources of meaning can be very strong, whilst our relationship with other sources can be more shallow.

So, what causes our relationship with a source of meaning to become intense? One factor is the amount of *time* we devote to the source. Dedicating a great amount of time to a given source of meaning increases the probability that we develop a deep, strong and intense connection with this source. However, it is not only the amount of time that contributes to the intensity of the relationship, but also how this time is spent with the source. For instance, we may say that 'work' is a source of meaning. This applies to all sources of meaning, including relationships, hobbies and religion.

We can say that a lack of depth reduces the extent to which we perceive a source as meaningful. In contrast, the more committed and devoted we are to a given source, the greater potential for meaning this source has.

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Now let's consider each of the current sources of meaning in your present life that we identified earlier. For each source, indicate the intensity of your relationship with this source. Give each source a number on a scale of 1-10 to indicate how deep you are currently going into every source of meaning (**1** not deep at all and **10** being very deep), i.e. how engaged with and committed to the source you are.

Current source #1

rating (1-10):

Current source #2

rating (1-10):

Current source #3

rating (1-10):

Current source #4

rating (1-10):

Current source #5

rating (1-10):

Current source #6

rating (1-10):

Current source #7

rating (1-10):

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Looking at your answers above, consider the following questions to help you understand which sources of meaning you have been investing in more/less, and if there are any sources you would like to develop greater depth in:

1. Let's focus on those sources of meaning with a high 'depth of meaning' rating. What causes you to be so engaged and committed to these sources? How do you typically interact with these sources of meaning?
2. Let's now have a look at those sources of meaning with a low 'depth of meaning' rating. What causes you to be less engaged in and not so committed to these sources? How do you typically interact with these sources of meaning?
3. What prevents you from being engaged in and committed to these sources of meaning?
4. What can you do to increase your engagement and commitment to the sources with a low 'depth of meaning' rating?
5. What could you do in order to increase the depth of these sources of meaning in your life? What concrete steps can you take?

DIMENSION #3: THE WEIGHT OF MEANING

The weight of meaning is the degree to which a given source of meaning fulfils important *needs* in your life and/or the lives of others. Some sources of meaning offer a greater potential for the experience of meaning in your life than others, based on the extent to which a source fulfils your personal and/or others' needs. For instance, watching television may not have the same weight of meaning as playing sports with friends. By playing sports with friends, you fulfil the need for connection, physical exercise, and self-actualization, whereas watching television may at best satisfy the need for relaxation.

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Again, consider each of the sources of meaning in your present life that we identified earlier.

For every source, *list the needs that it is satisfying for you*. Some common needs include companionship, autonomy, emotional peace, sense of competence, self-expression, physical well-being, and so on.

Name of current source

This source satisfies my need(s) for:

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Consider your answers in the previous question.

1. Which sources of meaning have the highest weight of meaning? In other words, which sources do you feel fulfil your personal and/or others' needs the most?
2. Which sources of meaning have the lowest weight of meaning? In other words, which sources do you feel fulfil your personal and/or others' needs the least?
3. Within these 'low weight' sources, what can you do differently to satisfy more of your or others' needs? (For instance, by going to the gym with a friend or family member, you can satisfy your need for connection and stay fit at the same time. Or, by doing something creative with friends next time you meet up, you can satisfy your need to express yourself and be creative instead of just meeting up and talking.)
4. Are there any important needs that you feel are not being satisfied at this moment in your life? If so, which needs?
5. Is there a source of meaning that could satisfy some of these needs?
6. What could you do in order to introduce or amplify this source of meaning in your life? What concrete steps can you take?

Now that you have completed this exercise, you may be starting to have more clarity over where you would like to be headed. Perhaps this entails developing a new source of meaning (e.g. a new sport). Or maybe tweaking the amount of time you spend on a neglected source (e.g. family). For some, you may discover unmet needs which could be causing you to feel dissatisfied with life. Whichever it is, remember that there is no right or wrong answer. Being honest with yourself and aware of what matters most to you will help you set more concrete goals to achieving a purposeful living.

Want to learn more?

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Ms June Fong is the Director and Principal Forensic Psychologist at Couch Psychology, a specialised practice providing holistic clinical and forensic psychological services to children, adolescents and adults. She has worked in Singapore, Australia and the Middle East and has been practising in the community for over 10 years. With her experience in managing complex, court-involved cases, she founded Couch Psychology in 2019, with the aim of making niche clinical and forensic evaluations, therapy and training available to as many people as possible.

