The Happiness Project: Distressed Adolescents’ Search for Personal Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This developed group manual intends to help distressed adolescents who are searching for meaning or purpose in their life (may it be in their academic or personal life and future vocation). The aim of this manual is for this population to achieve an increased sense of well-being by finding their purpose in life. There will be 6 sessions which will be executed on a weekly basis. The researcher will be able to determine the effectiveness of the group intervention by comparing the results of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire before and after the group intervention. The implication of this is to switch our focus from a search for happiness to a search for meaning since finding one’s meaning in life paves the way to finding happiness. Though this quest is a continuous process for we are all a work in progress, it is good to have a starting point than to continuously carry on with our lives without even knowing why we are here in the first place or without even knowing what we are searching for.

Keywords: meaning in life, group intervention manual, distressed adolescents, subjective well-being, group counseling

INTRODUCTION

We all experience a void or emptiness in our life at some point, at times a feeling of searching from within. In this search, we often ask ourselves: “Why am I here?” and “What is my purpose?” We want to find and explore our inner compass that would direct us in our journey in life and that would eventually lead us to finding happiness and inner peace. All the more is this experience daunting for adolescents, given that adolescence is the time of change that is exemplified by increased levels of personal searching (Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991) and taking on of more mature life roles (Erikson, 1968). Adolescence is the transition or adjustment period to adulthood when ethical values acquired in childhood are compared with the set of values gained as they were growing (Ozbay, 1997), thus a lot of personal searching goes on at this stage. Young adults experience many changes in all aspects of their lives (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O’Malley, 2004).

PURPOSE

This group manual intends to help distressed adolescents who are searching for meaning in their life. This manual aims to pave the way in their search for meaning to gain improved well-being and a sense of peace in their life. As pointed out by Viktor Frankl: “For the meaning of life differs from man to man, and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment.”

GROUP COMPOSITION

This developed group manual will be utilized with distressed adolescents (17-19 years old) who are experiencing a sense of meaninglessness or lack of direction in their life. These are
students who are enrolled in college and are distressed because of their search for meaning. The ideal group size will be around 8-10 participants. The group is homogenous based on the pre-screening interview.

OUTLINE OF SIX GROUP SESSIONS

Session 1

Purpose

The purpose for this session is to set expectations and norms. The first session will be focusing on getting to know each other and Expectation and Norm Setting. For this session, the group counseling meetings will be explained, there will be the introduction of the participants and the setting of norms and expectations.

Theme: Goal-Setting

The theme revolves around setting their goals for counseling and setting ground rules for the 6 sessions. The ground rules include: (1) coming on time and doing their activities – being committed (2) being supportive to each other and (3) respecting confidentiality.

Activities

The participants will introduce themselves and mention some things about themselves that they think are important for others to know. The expectations and ground rules will be established among group members. The members will be identifying their goals and expectations from these counseling sessions. The assignment for this first session is for the participants to come up with a journal for 1 week until the next session.

Process

This session is an opportunity for members to realize that they are not alone. There are people who are in the same situation as they are. Moreover, that they have a support network that is composed of people who could empathize with them since they know what they are going through.

Session 2

Purpose

The objective of the second session is to have a better understanding of the gifts or talents that one possesses. The participants could reflect on the following questions: (1) What are you good at or What are the abilities that you already possess? (2) What would you consider to be your positive qualities or traits?

Theme: Knowing One’s Gifts

The theme for the second session is knowing one’s special gifts or talents that makes one uniquely himself or herself. Knowing one’s gifts would allow a person to determine what they could share with their family, friends, and society in general.

Activities

The facilitator would ask the participants what transpired during the week by sharing highlights from their journal. The participants will be asked based from their sharing to come up with a list of at least 3 things that they know that they are good at and 3 things that they would consider to be their positive qualities. The participants will share their answers to pave the way for an interactive discussion. The assignment for this second session is for the
participants to continue with their journal and the list of the things that they are good at or they consider to be their positive qualities.

**Process**

This session focuses mainly on discovering and taking pride in one’s good points or qualities. This will allow the participants to boost their morale and make them confident in achieving their goals in life. By knowing their strong points, the participants will know what would give them an edge in dealing with challenges both in their academic and personal life. This in a way provides clarity or a better understanding of their positive qualities or traits.

**Session 3**

**Purpose**

The objective of the third session is to have a better understanding of their areas for improvement or enhancement. This is to make them aware of their weak points and to embrace them and work on them. By knowing one’s weak points, one will be able to accept himself or herself wholly not only for the good but for the bad as well.

**Theme: Embracing One’s Flaws**

The theme for the third session is accepting oneself both for the good and the bad since no one is perfect and both of these qualities make us who we are. By embracing oneself despite of one’s flaws one would prevent having pretensions just to please others and to get society’s stamp of approval.

**Activities**

The facilitator would ask the participants about the highlights last session to pave the way for the day’s activity. The participants will then be asked to reflect on at least 3 things that they would consider to be their weak points and how they address such issues. The participants will be addressing the following questions: (1) What are your weaknesses? (2) What do you do about it? (3) **What skills do you need? Or What capabilities will you need to learn?**

The participants will then share their answers to others to make the interaction collaborative and interactive. The participants will be reminded that there are some things that we just have to accept and embrace about ourselves. The assignment for this third session is for the participants to continue with their journal and a reflection on how they feel and think about the things or qualities they possess that they consider to be their flaws.

**Process**

This session focuses on accepting and embracing one’s flaws and imperfections. Last session, the participants were asked to reflect on their strong points, this time by being aware of their flaws the participants will realize that nobody is perfect and that everybody has his or her flaws which one just has to work on and to accept since both the good and the bad make us who we are. By knowing one’s strong and weak points, the participants will be able to be confident and at the same time humble knowing that nobody is infallible.

**Session 4**

**Purpose**

The objective of the fourth session is to discover or have a better understanding of the things that they are passionate about or what gives them fire or drive to carry on despite of life’s challenges. Sad to say, not everyone knows exactly what his or her passion is right away that
is why it is pertinent to dig deep inside oneself to know what gives oneself that magic or firework to carry on despite of life’s challenges.

**Theme: Ignite the Fire in your Life**

The theme for the fourth session is discovering and/or having a better understanding what the participants are passionate about. By determining one’s passion one would be able to avoid the pitfalls of feeling bored, uninspired and heavy. It is important to know what gives one the spark that would ignite the fire in his or her life.

**Activities**

The participants will be asked to reflect on the things that they are passionate about. The participants will make a list of everything they love including all the things, people and concepts that they are passionate about or attracted to. By doing this, they will be reminded as to what is important to them about their passion. Their assignment is to write about their dreams. They will write about something they would like to do or the way they dream or visualize themselves in the future. They will describe it in as much detail as possible. They will be reminded not to limit themselves.

**Process**

This session focuses on discovering and having a better understanding of what one is passionate about. This would pave the way in staying motivated despite of the stressors and challenges that they face. It is important for the participants to be reminded that life is short thus it is important to pursue their dreams and passion.

**Session 5**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this session is to have a better understanding of their value system. By determining one’s value system, the participants will determine what they can take in pursuing their dreams and what they would not give up since it is part of their moral code.

**Theme: Importance of Knowing One’s Core Values**

The theme is knowing one’s core values. This is pertinent since one’s personal value system ultimately shapes how one responds to life’s various situations. It is a determining factor as to what one could sacrifice for his or her passion or dreams and what one cannot pursue due to his or her personal value system.

**Activities**

The facilitator would ask the participants about their assignment the previous week: their dreams. This would serve as the springboard for the fifth session’s topic which is all about core values. The facilitator would then ask the participants to think about what they are willing to give up for their dreams and what they cannot afford to lose as part of themselves. The participants will be addressing the following questions: (1) What do you value in life? (2) What do you believe in or What do you need to believe? (3) What are you certain of? The assignment is to write their Personal Moral Code based on their core values.

**Process**

This session focuses on discovering and having a better understanding of one’s value system. Since the participants seem to be swept away by the current of life that is why they have difficulty discerning their meaning in life, it is the time to sit down and find out and reflect on what their values are. Knowing one’s core values can help one make better life decisions.
Values evolve and become more defined as one ages and mature thus it is important for these distressed adolescents to have a starting point in clarifying their value system.

**Session 6**

**Purpose**

The last session is “Planning for the Future.” The core objective for this session is to prepare the participants to be their own counselor in the future. The purpose of this final session is to pave the way in finding one’s bliss by searching one’s meaning in life. By having a grasp of our meaning or purpose in life this would lead to improved well-being and direction in life.

**Theme : Finding One’s Bliss Thru Finding One’s Meaning**

The theme is finding one’s meaning in order to have improved well-being. This is pertinent since finding one’s happiness is the essence of living. Normally, we would hear people saying “All I want is to be happy.” Both young and old alike search for one’s meaning in order to be happy.

**Activities**

The participants will be setting action plans and crafting their Personal Mission Statement by integrating their Personal Moral Code which was their previous homework. For their exercise, the participants will be asked to write their action plans to be the person they want to be. They will also reflect on the following questions: (1) Are you willing to take these action plans? (2) Is anything stopping you from taking these action plans? Then there will be an interactive and collaborative discussion among group participants. The participants would come up with a list of their most important goals pertaining both to their school/academics and personal life. They would make a specific list by categorizing or labeling their goals as short term (within 6 months to 1 year) and long term (3-5 years) from now. The participants will craft their Personal Mission Statement by anchoring it on their short and long term goals. By doing this, they will be able to incorporate their value system together with their life’s purpose. It is important for the participants to live by their mission statement since this would pave the way to be the person they want to be.

**Process**

Discovering their meaning in life can be facilitated by the process of setting action plans. By setting action plans, the participants will be able to take into consideration what problems they want to avoid and be very clear with what they want to achieve. Thus, reminding the participants of what they live for or their meaning in life keeps them motivated which paves the way to improved well-being. As what Seligman (1988) pointed out that high depression rate can be attributed to loss of meaning. Meaning in life is a pertinent part of happiness and subjective well-being (Morgan and Farsides, 2009).

The group will provide plenty of support and sharing for 6 weeks but what is more important are the techniques that will allow them to continue coping after the counseling sessions. To connect with their deepest self, the participants have to find some time each day to reflect about who they are and what gives meaning in their life. Figuring out what is really important to them can make daily stressors less of a burden. After the counseling sessions, the participants will be advised to continuously: (1) focus on their passion in life, value system and beliefs; (2) keep a journal to help them express and assess their deepest emotions and thoughts; (3) nurture their spirit by engaging in activities that they are passionate about and (4) focus on what is good in themselves and others. This is pertinent since this would
equip distressed adolescents with knowledge and skills in tapping emotional resources that would diminish negative affective conditions and optimize meaningful life situations.

REFERENCES


