

Striving for the Sacred: Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Religion

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Religion invests human existence with meaning by establishing goals and value systems that potentially pertain to all aspects of a persons' life. A goals approach provides a general unifying framework to capture the dynamic aspect of religion in people's lives. Empirical research on the measurement of spirituality and religion through personal goals is described. To illustrate the application of the goals framework, data from the author's research program on personal goals and quality of life in persons with neuromuscular diseases are described. Framing subjective quality-of-life outcomes in terms of goals can lead to new possibilities for understanding adaptation to physical disabilities and in particular, the understanding of the religious and spiritual dimensions of disability and rehabilitation.

Faith, classically understood, is not a separate dimension of life, a compartmentalized specialty. Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions. . . as such, faith is an integral part of one's character or personality (Fowler, 1981, pp. 14 & 92).

The recent completion of the sequencing of the human genome has rekindled interest in the degree to which human beings are both similar to and distinct from other species. Though in fact anthropologists and primatologists regularly remind us that approximately 98% of our DNA is identical with our nearest phylogenetic cousin, as far as we know humans are the only meaning-seeking species on the planet. Meaning-making is an activity that is distinctly human, a function of how the human brain is organized (Rue, 2000). The many ways in which humans conceptualize, create, and search for meaning has become a recent focus of behavioral science research on quality of life and subjective well-being (Wong & Fry, 1998).

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This article will review the recent literature on meaning-making in the context of religious and spiritual personal goals. My intention will be to document how the pursuit of personally significant goals in general, and goals of a religious and spiritual nature in particular, can contribute to positive experience and the construction of life meaning.

Over the past two decades, psychologists have learned how goals, as key integrative and analytic units in the study of human motivation (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Karoly, 1999, for reviews), contribute to long-term levels of well-being. Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to long-term affective states of emotional well-being as well as cognitive states of life satisfaction and meaning in life. Research on the structure of well-being has reliably identified three components: Positive affect or pleasant emotions, negative affect or unpleasant emotions, and a cognitive component of life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Positive affect reflects a person's level of pleasurable engagement with the world, and negative affect is an indicator of a person's level of subjective distress. A primary focus in this line of inquiry has been to understand how personal goals are related to long-term levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and how ultimately to use this knowledge for well-being interventions. How do goals contribute to SWB? Of all the goals that people strive for, which really matter? Which goals most provide a sense of meaning and purpose?

Personal Goal Strivings as Units of Analysis

Personal strivings are consciously accessible and personally meaningful objectives that people pursue in their daily lives (see Emmons, 1999, for a review). Personal strivings refer to the typical goals that a person characteristically is trying to accomplish. Several points need to be made with respect to the term "personal strivings" and their conceptual nature. First, an emphasis on the concept of striving implies an action-oriented perspective on human motivation. It stresses the behavioral movement toward identifiable endpoints as can be seen in the following definition of goals as "an imagined or envisaged state condition toward which a person aspires and which drives voluntary activity" (Karoly, 1993, p. 274). Second, strivings provide information not only on what a person is trying to do, but also on who a person is trying to be—the relatively high-level goals that are central aspects of a person's identity. Third, goals are highly personal—they reflect subjective experience, values, and commitments as uniquely identified by the person. Fourth, they represent potentialities rather than actualities in that they are never fully satisfied. They reflect what a person is trying to do, not necessarily what they are actually doing. To strive also implies that meaning comes from the "journey" and not just arriving at the "destination." However, one can also strive toward particular modes of being without necessarily making a strenuous effort; for instance, in Eastern philosophies, which emphasize a cessation of striving and

Table 1. Examples of Personal Strivings

Avoid letting anything upset me
Work toward higher athletic capabilities
Meet new people through my present friends
Promote happiness and hope to others
Accept others as they are
Be myself and not do things to please others
Not eat between meals to lose weight
Not be a materialistic person
Appear intelligent to others
Always be thankful, no matter what the circumstances
Reciprocate kindnesses
Keep my beagles happy and healthy
Do what is pleasing to God

Note. Examples come from personal strivings data archive collected by Robert A. Emmons.

nonattachment to goals (e.g., being at peace with oneself, being at one with the universe). Certainly the notion of strivings (as a noun) would include these latter examples, in that they reflect desired endpoints or objectives to be realized. Spiritual concerns are reflected in both “doing” as well as in “being” goals; indeed, perhaps that is an important distinction between the types of goals that adherents to Western and Eastern religious systems aspire toward. Examples of strivings are shown in Table 1.

The Centrality of Goals in Human Functioning

People spend significant amounts of their daily lives reflecting on, deciding between, and pursuing personally important and meaningful goals, goals that lend order and structure to their lives (Emmons, 1986). Goals, according to Klinger (1998), serve as “the linchpin of psychological organization” (p. 44). As internal representations of desired outcomes, they determine the contents of consciousness, including most thoughts and accompanying emotional states. Klinger (1998) has demonstrated that our preoccupations and the emotions we feel are tied to the nature of our goals and the status of their pursuits. Goals are the concretized expression of future orientation and life purpose, and provide a convenient and powerful metric for examining these vital elements of a positive life. More explicitly, goal attainment seems to be a major benchmark for the experience of well-being. When asked what makes for a happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life, people spontaneously discuss their life goals, wishes, and dreams for the future. For many people, of course, the primary goal in life *is* to be happy. Yet research indicates that happiness is most often a byproduct of participating in worthwhile projects and activities that do not have as their primary focus the attainment of happiness. Whether they focus primarily on basic research or intervention, psychologists also see goal striving as vital to “the good life.” Psychological well-being has been defined as “the

self-evaluated level of the person's competence and the self, weighted in terms of the person's hierarchy of goals" (Lawton, 1996, p. 328). Frisch (1998) defined happiness as "the extent to which important goals, needs, and wishes have been fulfilled" (p. 35). A rapidly expanding database now exists demonstrating that personal goals are a valid representation of how people structure and experience their lives—they are critical constructs for understanding the ups and downs of everyday life, and they are key elements for understanding both the positive life as well as psychological dysfunctions (Károly, 1999). People's priorities, goals, and concerns are key determinants of their overall quality of life. The possession of and progression toward important life goals are essential for long-term well-being. Several investigators have found that individuals who are involved in the pursuit of personally meaningful goals possess greater emotional well-being and better physical health than do persons who lack goal direction (see Emmons, 1999, for a review). Along with researchers, therapists are increasingly advocating a motivational analysis of life trajectories. For example, quality-of-life therapy (Frisch, 1998) advocates the importance of revising goals, standards, and priorities as a strategy for boosting life happiness and satisfaction. Similarly, the development of goals that allow for a greater sense of purpose in life is one of the cornerstones of well-being therapy (Fava, 1999), meaning-centered counseling (Wong, 1998), and goal-focused group psychotherapy (Klausner et al., 1998).

Goals and Life Meaning

Goals are thought to produce well-being by serving as important sources of meaning. According to Reker and Wong (1988), goals and values, as the motivational component of meaning, provide guidelines for living, orienting a person to that which is valuable, meaningful, and purposeful. Whereas values are more abstract orientations that may or may not be reflected in concrete actions (Roccas, this issue) goals represent the desired outcomes that a person is currently committed to working toward. The goals construct has given form and substance to the amorphous concept of "meaning in life" that humanistic psychology has long understood as a key element of human functioning. For example, a generative goal to "teach my son to make a difference in his community" lends meaning and direction to the role of parenthood. Some have argued that the construct of "meaning" has no meaning outside of a person's goals and purposes, that is, what a person is trying to do. Psychologists are beginning to warm to the concept of personal meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998), and are gradually recognizing that despite its somewhat vague and boundless nature, the topic can be seriously and fruitfully investigated (Debats, 1996; Ryff, 1989; Wong & Fry, 1998).

In the context of well-being, contemporary psychological research, consistent with the existentialist perspective, has shown that *meaning matters*. The explanations that a person offers concerning ultimate issues—the nature of life and death,

the meaning of suffering and pain, of what really matters in life—have profound implications for individual well-being. Without meaning and purpose, there is little reason to do what is necessary to live and to endure the inevitable suffering and trials that come with life. The scientific and clinical relevance of the personal meaning construct has been demonstrated in the adjustment literature, in which indicators of meaningfulness (e.g., purpose in life, a sense of coherence) predict positive functioning (French & Joseph, 1999; Robak & Griffin, 2000), while indicators of meaninglessness (e.g., anomie, alienation) are regularly associated with psychological distress and pathology (Baumeister, 1991; Keyes, 1998; Seeman, 1991). Recent empirical research has demonstrated that a strong sense of meaning is associated with life satisfaction and happiness, while a lack of meaning is predictive of depression and disengagement (Reker & Wong, 1988; Wong & Fry, 1998). Meaning is conceptualized in most research as a relatively independent component of well-being, and researchers have recently advocated including it in conceptual models of well-being, quality of life, and personal growth (Compton, Smith, Cornish, & Qualls, 1996; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

A consensus is emerging on what can be considered to be at least a preliminary *taxonomy of meaning*. Table 2 shows the major categories of life meaning that have emerged across three different research programs on personal meaning. The four life meaning categories of *achievement/work*, *relationships/intimacy*, *religion/spirituality*, and *self-transcendence/generativity* appear to encompass most of the domains in which people strive for a sense of meaning. Achievement includes being committed to one’s work, believing in its worth, and liking challenge. The relationships/intimacy category includes relating well to others, trusting others, and being altruistic and helpful. Having a personal relationship with God, believing in an afterlife, and contributing to a faith community are expressions of religion/spirituality. Finally, generativity encompasses contributing to society, leaving a legacy, and transcending self-interests. What makes the robustness of these findings of meaning factors especially impressive is that the results are based on diverse methodologies (including rating scales, surveys, and interviews)

Table 2. A Consensual Taxonomy of Life Meaning

Author: Wong (1998)	Emmons (1999)	Ebersole (1998)
Method: Personal Meaning Profile	Personal Strivings	Life Narratives
Achievement	Achievement	Life work
Relationship	Intimacy	Relationships
Religion	Religion/spirituality	Religious beliefs
Self-transcendence	Generativity	Service

Note. Achievement includes being committed to one’s work, believing in its worth, and liking challenge. The relationships/intimacy category includes relating well to others, trusting others, and being altruistic and helpful. Religion/spirituality encompasses having a personal relationship with God, believing in an afterlife, and contributing to a faith community. Generativity refers to contributing to society and leaving a legacy.

in heterogeneous populations. For example, the Personal Strivings methodology (Emmons, 1999) utilizes a semi-projective sentence completion task; the Personal Meaning Profile developed by Wong (1998) resembles Q-sort items; and Ebersole (1998) employed narrative methodology in asking people to write about the central personal meaning in their life.

Ultimate Concerns: Religious and Spiritual Goals

When it comes to contributing to well-being, not all goals are equal. In order to explore the contours of goals and well-being, we developed a coding system for classifying personal strivings into 12 thematic content categories (Emmons, 1999, Appendix B). Three types of goal strivings consistently relate to well-being: intimacy, generativity, and spirituality. These three goal types correspond to three of the four major categories of personal meaning from Table 2. Of these, we have recently focused on spiritual strivings as primary elements of people's goal-based meaning systems.

Spiritual strivings refer to goals that are oriented toward the sacred. They are those personal goals that are concerned with ultimate purpose, ethics, commitment to a higher power, and a seeking of the divine in daily experience. By identifying and committing themselves to spiritual goals, people strive to develop and maintain a relationship with the sacred. In other words, spiritual strivings are strivings that reflect a desire to transcend the self, that reflect an integration of the individual with larger and more complex units, or that reflect deepening or maintaining a relationship with a higher power. Strivings are coded as spiritual if they reflect concern for an integration of the person with larger and more complex units: with humanity, nature, with the cosmos ("to achieve union with the totality of existence," "to immerse myself in nature and be part of it," "to live my life at all times for God," "to approach life with mystery and awe"). As implied above, spiritual strivings contain both conventional religious themes as well as more personalized expressions of spiritual concern. Although my focus in this article is primarily with "religious spirituality," it is certainly the case that other, nonreligious, humanistic versions of the concept can be detected in personal strivings as well. Coding strivings in this manner allows for greater inclusivity than do many existing measures of spirituality or religiosity and is sensitive to the diversity of spiritual expression in a religiously pluralistic culture.

Such a conception of spirituality is consistent with a number of authors who, while acknowledging the diversity of meaning, affirm that a common core meaning of spirituality/religion is the recognition of a transcendent, metaempirical dimension of reality (see Emmons, 1999, chapter 5). For example, Tillich (1957), in his classic analysis of the affective and cognitive bases of faith, contended that the essence of religion, in the broadest and most inclusive sense, is *ultimate concern*. Faith, according to Tillich, is the state of being ultimately concerned—concerns

that have a sense of urgency unparalleled in human motivation. Ultimate concern is “a passion for the infinite” (p. 8), and religion “is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life” (Tillich, 1963, p. 4). In religious behavior, “man seeks the largest values in their utmost completion . . . the ultimate relationships” (Johnson, 1959, p. 102).

Concerns over ultimate questions of meaning and existence, purpose and value, do find expression in one form or another through personal goals. In attempting to answer questions such as “Does life have any real meaning?” or “Is there any ultimate purpose to human existence?” implicit worldview beliefs give rise to goal concerns that reflect how people “walk with ultimacy” in daily life. In personal goals that participants have generated in past research studies, they report the ultimate concerns of trying to “be aware of the spiritual meaningfulness of my life,” “discern and follow God’s will for my life,” “bring my life in line with my beliefs,” and “speak up on issues concerning people who have been wronged.”

The use of goal language in discussions of spirituality and religion may seem foreign. Yet religion is about goals. One of the basic functions of a religious belief system and a religious worldview is that it provides “an ultimate vision of what people should be striving for in their lives” (Pargament & Park, 1995, p. 15) and the strategies to reach those ends. In addition to the prescriptive nature of religion, there is also a long history of using goal language metaphorically to depict spiritual growth. In devotional writings, spiritual growth and spiritual maturity are viewed as a process of goal attainment, with the ultimate goal being intimacy with the divine.

In our own research, we have found that people differ in their tendency to attribute spiritual significance to their strivings, with percentages of spiritual strivings ranging from 0% to nearly 50%, depending upon the nature of the sample studied. College males have the lowest level of avowed spiritual strivings, whereas elderly, church-going females tend to have the highest levels. In both community-based and college student samples, we have found that the presence of intimacy strivings, generativity strivings, and spiritual strivings within a person’s goal hierarchy predict greater SWB, particularly higher positive affect. In each case, we examine the proportion of striving in that category relative to the total number of strivings generated. This provides a rough index of the centrality of each motivational theme within the person’s overall goal hierarchy. Spiritual strivings are related to higher levels of SWB, especially to greater positive affect and to both marital and overall life satisfaction (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998). In the Emmons et al. (1998) study, these relations were stronger for women than for men, in accord with the literature on gender differences in religion and SWB (Stark, 2002). Spiritual strivings were also rated as more important, requiring more effort, and engaged in for more intrinsic reasons than were nonspiritual strivings. Investing goals with a sense of sacredness confers upon them a power to organize experience and to promote well-being that is absent in nonsacred strivings (Mahoney

& Pargament, 2000). In their sample of 150 community adults, Mahoney and Pargament (2000) found that people tended to place a high priority on strivings that they viewed as sacred. They devoted more time and energy to spiritual strivings and derived greater satisfaction and sense of meaning from them relative to strivings that were more self-focused and materially oriented (see also Pargament, Magyar, & Murray-Swank, this issue).

The Power of Spiritual Strivings

What accounts for the unique ability of spiritual strivings to predict well-being outcomes? As Pargament (2002) has convincingly argued, identifying that which is sacred and striving to protect and preserve the sacred lends deep significance to human existence, a significance that is difficult to explain through more basic psychological or social levels of description. Spiritual strivings may have a unique empowering function; people are more likely to persevere in these strivings, even under difficult circumstances. This empowering function may be stronger in groups that have limited access to other resources, such as racial minorities, the elderly, and the chronically ill (Pargament, 1997). People are more likely to take measures to protect and preserve strivings that focus on the sacred, and devote time and effort toward their realization. People admit that in today's secular culture, whether their spiritual strivings are socially accepted or socially sanctioned, they derive tremendous meaning and purpose from them. Spiritual strivings are also likely to provide stability and support in times of crisis by reorienting people to what is ultimately important in life (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998).

The unique ability of spiritual strivings on well-being may be partially explained by the ability of religion to provide a unifying philosophy of life and to serve as an integrating force (Allport, 1950; Tillich, 1957). Conflict or fragmentation is a source of stress that can undermine meaning-making, and, thus well-being. Research has documented the deleterious effect of goal conflict on well-being (Emmons & King, 1988). Although meaning is forged out of the many possibilities that life presents, these same choices can be experienced as paralyzing (see also Schwartz, 2000). Johnson (1959) describes this predicament:

Out of the very contradictions that provide freedom come the distresses of conflict. Life can never be simple or easy for a conscious person. He must forever contend with the competing demands of a complicated world that give him no rest. Like Adam, the prototype of every man, he is lured by the unknown, tempted by untasted possibilities, seduced by the one he loves, forbidden by highest authority, caught in conflicts of desire, overcome with guilty remorse and driven forth to wrestle and sweat in a world of contradiction and uncertainty (p. 104).

Some support for the integrative role of religious striving comes from a recent study of ours (Emmons et al., 1998), which found that the presence of theistic spiritual strivings in particular were related to low levels of inter-goal conflict, and to greater levels of goal integration. Spiritual strivings appeared to have a

greater number of positive, excitatory connections with other goals, and fewer negative, inhibitory connections within people's overall goal systems. Without an overall organizational framework that unites separate goal strivings into a coherent structure, a person would have a very difficult time living a life that is meaningful. Religion, then, has the potential to invest human existence with meaning by establishing goals and value systems that pertain to all aspects of a person's life with the potential to confer unity upon disparate experiences. At the same time, not all religious or spiritual goals facilitate other goals or even one another. For example, in our research we found that desires to share one's faith with others were often not consonant with other goals in the person's hierarchy, indicating that certain spiritual strivings may be associated with greater overall conflict.

Spiritual Goals in the Lives of Persons with Neuromuscular Disease

Having documented that there are substantial and replicable relationships between spiritual goals and indicators of SWB in healthy populations, we wished to demonstrate the value of a goals approach in clinical health populations. Goals and goal-system variables have been utilized in several lines of research to examine positive and negative functioning in the area of health psychology. Goal variables have been identified as a key determinant of both health promotion and health endangerment (Ewart, 1991; Karoly, 1993) and have been linked to conditions as diverse as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, alcohol and tobacco abuse, chronic pain, and hypochondriasis. For example, Affleck et al. (1998; see also Affleck et al., 2001) found that perceived progress toward personal goals attenuated the effect of pain on well-being in women with fibromyalgia. Women who reported more progress toward their goals on a given day experienced an increase in emotional well-being for that day that was independent of pain or fatigue levels. Thus, a personal goals approach has potential to lead to new insights into understanding the effects of chronic illness on emotional and psychological well-being.

We have recently begun a project to examine how a personal goals perspective can be applied to understanding issues related to the quality of life and SWB of people with neuromuscular diseases (NMDs). NMDs are estimated to affect approximately 4 million people in the United States (National Institute of Health, 1998). The majority of participants in our study had post-polio disease (PPS). PPS is a condition that can strike polio survivors anywhere from 10 to 40 years after recovery from an initial attack of the poliomyelitis virus, and occurs in approximately 70% of persons infected with polio. It is characterized by a further weakening of muscles that were previously injured by polio infection. Symptoms include fatigue, slowly progressive muscle weakness, muscle and joint pain, and muscular atrophy. Some patients experience only minor symptoms, while others develop spinal muscular atrophy or what appears to be, but is not, a form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. PPS is a very slowly progressing condition marked

by long periods of stability and an unpredictable course, although it is rarely life-threatening. Other neuromuscular diseases that were represented in our sample included Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disease, Limb Girdle Muscular Dystrophy, and Facioscapulohumeral Dystrophy (for a detailed description of each disease, see <http://www.rehabinfo.net/resources/diseases/list/>).

Few studies have systematically examined what determines the quality of life of individuals with neuromuscular disease. Objective indicators, such as functional ability in daily living, occupational status, and social activities, are typically the focus of rehabilitation specialists. These indices, however, fail to account for much variance in SWB (Abresch, Seyden, & Wineinger, 1998). By assisting people in the identification of their current priorities and commitments, by examining the sense of meaning and purpose that goals provide as well as their manageability, stressfulness, and support, a personal goals approach serves to clarify what is possible and desirable to obtain. Framing subjective quality-of-life outcomes such as personal well-being in terms of goals may lead to new possibilities for understanding adaptation to physical disabilities.

While little is known about the spiritual lives of individuals with neuromuscular disease, the general literature on religion and coping suggests that spiritual needs are especially strong in people coping with chronic diseases. Some authors have remarked that a spiritual or religious worldview can be a source of empowerment for people with disabilities, and a means of moving beyond physical limitations to embrace a more holistic vision of life (Selway & Ashman, 1998). A pair of recent review articles (Kilpatrick & McCullough, 2000; Selway & Ashman, 1998) on religion, disability, and health lamented the dearth of empirical research in this area and called for additional research to understand the religious and spiritual dimensions of disability and rehabilitation. The studies that do exist have tended to examine the reactive role of religion in coping with disability. The possible proactive role of religious orientation in setting direction and purpose in people's lives has yet to be considered.

With this rationale in mind, we administered a lengthy survey consisting of the Personal Strivings Assessment Packet (Emmons, 1999), measures of SWB, health status, functional ability, and a variety of other variables relevant to quality of life to over 200 individuals with neuromuscular disease. Participants were obtained through the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic. Because of the special needs of this population with respect to achieving integration into their communities, specific measures were created to assess the degree to which their personal goals enabled them to feel connected to and integrated into their communities. Strivings were appraised for their personal meaningfulness, difficulty, likelihood of attainment and other attributes (see Emmons, 1999, for a full description of striving dimensions). We also examined a number of social ecological goal variables, including the degree to which others were aware of the striving (visibility), were supportive of the striving (support),

hindered the striving (hindrance), and whether the striving causes strain or tension in everyday interactions (strain).

Regression analyses indicated that the goal-based measure of integration was the strongest predictor of overall levels of well-being (a composite of life satisfaction, positive affect, and vitality) of any of the goal variables. Community integration through goals, perceived meaningfulness, and low goal difficulty were the strongest predictors of life satisfaction. Goal meaningfulness and low goal difficulty were the strongest predictors of positive affect. In other words, as goals increased in meaningfulness and attainability, persons with NMD felt more satisfied with their lives. We created a goal-based measure of spirituality based on the concept of sanctification (see Pargament, Magyar, & Murray-Swank, this issue). Self-ratings of the degree to which the goal brings the person closer to God were positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect. The degree to which pain interfered with the person's ability to work toward his or her goals was predictive of psychological distress (negative affect), as was the amount of interpersonal strain perceived by the person to be caused by the striving. In contrast, a global rating of pain was unrelated to well-being, suggesting that the goal-relevant pain measure is a more sensitive indicator of quality of life than is a global rating of overall degree of pain. Overall, the goal variables accounted for 39% to 44% of the variance in SWB ratings. This finding dovetails with the research by Affleck et al. (1998), who found that goal pursuit is a key motivational-cognitive construct for chronic pain in patients with fibromyalgia. Interestingly, in their study, effort toward health and fitness goals was not diminished on days with increasing pain, but effort and progress toward interpersonal goals was, indicating that pain does not affect all goals equally.

Improving the quality of life of persons with neuromuscular disease has been a long-standing concern of rehabilitation medicine (Abresch et al., 1998). Yet little information has been provided as to what factors are critical for achieving a high quality of life. Facilitating patients' identification of personally meaningful, attainable strivings and developing workable strategies for their accomplishment becomes a priority for rehabilitation providers, enabling them to "live happily and productively on the same level as their neighbors" (Krusen, 1994). Frisch (1998) has demonstrated that goals' setting and values clarification provide meaning and clarity to a client's life, and that changing one's goals through a process of reprioritization is a key strategy for increasing quality of life. Determining a person's interest in spiritual or religious goals should be part of any person-centered planning process (Gaventa, 2001/02). The results of the research presented here suggest that rehabilitation providers will need to take seriously their patient's spiritual beliefs and goals, and to develop methods for assessing their clients' spiritual and religious functioning and its impact on their well-being. A personal strivings assessment can be easily integrated with existing tools designed to assess patient spirituality (Fitchett, 1993).

Conclusions

Motivational constructs such as goals have been under-appreciated by researchers as sources of meaning in people's lives. People often define themselves and their lives by what they are trying to do and by who they are trying to be. Spiritual and religious goals, above all others, appear to provide people with significant meaning and purpose. As Silberman (this issue) points out, an analysis of religion as a goal-based meaning system facilitates an understanding of the dynamic, process-oriented function of religion and could provide a unifying framework for the psychological study of religion. To the extent that their meaning-making systems contain religious and spiritual goals to strive for, they are likely to experience life as fulfilling, meaningful, and purposeful, even in the face of a deteriorating and disabling physical condition. Religion is, thus, able to serve as a general unifying framework to bring about harmony and connection among a person's diverse strivings.

While spiritual strivings tended to be associated with higher levels of well-being, it should not be assumed that spiritual goals necessarily guarantee emotional well-being. There are many possible ways in which spiritual goals might not contribute to well-being, and may even be detrimental for well-being. For example, spirituality that results in excessive self-preoccupation, can discourage generative actions such as responsible parenting (Dollahite, 1998). High-level religious strivings, if not accompanied by concrete plans and strategies for attainment, might be experienced as a source of frustration. Like other high-level strivings, successful self-regulation hinges on the identification of progress indicators. Unlike other high-level strivings, however, spiritual strivings might provide sufficient meaning and purpose to offset the uneasiness associated with other forms of abstract strivings. Serious religious mindfulness can make a person increasingly uneasy about his or her shortcomings, particularly when the person is strongly committed to a goal of living a virtuous life. Although religions are often accused of burdening a person with guilt, dissatisfaction can be desirable if it is used as fuel for constructive life change. Even usually positive characteristics can have harmful consequences.

More significantly, what contributes to the self-perceived well-being of an individual might be detrimental to the well-being of others. It is quite likely that the terrorists who perpetrated the September 11 atrocities would have considered themselves successful in attaining their spiritual strivings. On both national and international levels the spiritual strivings of certain groups can be in conflict with those of others, facilitating intergroup conflicts and wars. Little (1983) has suggested ways of measuring inter-goal conflict at an institutional level. Such research would be an important extension of the individually based goals approach to well-being described in this article. Goals that fulfill individualistic, but not collective

or societal needs may ultimately lead to lower quality of life and to a worsening of interpersonal relationships.

To know which goals are out of reach, which are not in our best interest, and which really matter is essential for constructing a meaningful life. Nozick (1989) defined wisdom as “being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs . . . knowing and understanding not merely the proximate goods but the ultimate ones, and seeing the world in this light” (p. 276). A wise person knows which goals are ultimately fulfilling and which offer only the illusion of fulfillment, and will appropriate this information into his or her life, as well as transmit this knowledge to future generations.

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