

CHAPTER 7

Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Mission

This chapter challenges you to develop a clearer and perhaps new sense of purpose that extends beyond yourself and your own needs. Engaging in a mission to help others can produce posttraumatic growth in any of the areas we've talked about. By being of service to others, you will become familiar again with your own personal strength and what you have to offer. The satisfaction you feel may give you a greater appreciation of life and perhaps your own life situation, even with its difficulties. You will be exploring new possibilities for yourself, perhaps even new commitments, work, devotions, or personal identity. By engaging in a mission that benefits others, you very likely will feel more compassion and empathy, which will improve your relationships with others. Finally, there is a spiritual aspect to such work that may challenge your beliefs in this area of your life.

This may be a difficult chapter, as it requires considerable self-reflection, challenging of self-defeating behaviors, and taking risks. But almost everyone is able to make this important transition in a journey toward growth. You have to trust in your abilities and sense of compassion. If you have lost your sense of purpose in life, you can get it back or, more likely, develop a changed sense of purpose. Trauma is full of loss, and this may be the most profound loss of all. But taking on this particular challenge of trauma can yield some of the most satisfying aspects of posttraumatic growth.

Loss of Purpose

A particularly cruel aspect of trauma is that it seems to close down parts of your life that have been important and meaningful. This leads to a profound sense of loss and

purpose. For example, Mary, a mother who tragically lost her five-year-old son in a car accident, became paralyzed with feelings of loss and grief. Even though she had completed college and begun her career as a nurse, she had always known that her focus in life would be as a mother. When her child was born, Mary left her career and put everything into being a mother. She loved being a mother and thrived in this role. After her son's death, many months went by, and Mary struggled with intense feelings of loss. She told friends and family how empty she felt and how life no longer had meaning. She fell into a deep depression, and her marriage was on the verge of being over. Fortunately, at the request of her friend and former coworker, Mary agreed to visit a support group provided by her local hospice organization. In this group, Mary was able to process her feelings of loss. Over time, her depression lessened and her marriage improved. She and her husband had two more children together, and Mary once again thrived. She also organized support groups for parents who were struggling with the death of a child. Since she found the support group helpful to her in the past, she wanted to help other parents deal with their grief and learn to really live again.

Mary is a good example of how loss and grief can cause someone to lose a sense of meaning and purpose. In fact, for Mary, her new purpose in life seemed to be one of grieving. It was difficult for her to see beyond the despair she was in. She was unable to see new possibilities or other pathways. This is a point in the growth process where some people get stuck. In essence, loss and grief can blind you to new possibilities and pathways. These feelings can simply take over. Fortunately for Mary, she found a way past these obstacles and ultimately found new meaning in her role as a parent and in the work she does in serving other bereaved parents.

Managing Loss and Grief

In chapter 3, we talked about how to manage strong emotions and intrusive ruminations. The concepts we discussed and exercises we shared are relevant here. However, if you continue to struggle with loss and grief, there are some other things you can do to manage these feelings.

It's important to understand that strong feelings of loss and grief are normal after enduring a difficult life event. These feelings are common not only after a death, as with Mary, but also in the aftermath of many traumatic life events, as trauma always involves loss in some way. Whether you lost a loved one to illness or an accident, had your sense of safety and security stolen from you after being assaulted, or were left

feeling vulnerable, worthless, and unloved after a breakup or divorce, it will take time to heal. Feeling depressed and anxious, having problems with sleep and appetite, and feeling angry, resentful, and numb are to be expected. It doesn't mean you are crazy. And for the vast majority of people, these problems are time-limited.

Remind yourself that healing takes time. Although time does not necessarily heal all wounds, in spite of what the old saying claims, it certainly does help. What is important in this period of time is what you do with it. Don't rush through the grieving process. Allow time to take away the acute distress associated with loss while also understanding that some degree of longing and loss may remain. Accept the fact that your life has changed while also remembering that growth can come with change.

Don't forget to rely on those around you who care about you and whom you trust. Few things in life are done well in isolation. This is particularly true for overcoming emotional struggle. The collective compassion and wisdom of those around you is immense. Tap into it by asking for help. In addition to asking for emotional support, you can ask for help with grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and having someone go on walks with you. It is critical that you take care of your basic needs like nutrition, physical activity, and maintaining your home.

Lastly, let yourself mourn. Grief can produce a profound sense of emptiness and despair. In order to overcome these feelings, you need to actively mourn your loss. You can actively mourn the death of a loved one through a wake, a funeral, or a memorial service. These formal activities allow you to remember your loved one and start the process of living without your loved one physically present. Of course, such rituals are only a start, and many more actions over time can help you mourn. But how do you mourn other losses? It depends on who you are and what you have lost.

For someone who has recently divorced, an act of mourning could be donating to charity anything that an ex-spouse chose to leave behind. Or it could consist of burying, burning, or giving away pictures and other visual reminders of the relationship. A person who narrowly escaped death from a motor vehicle accident may hold a "funeral" mourning the loss of her previous sense of safety and security while also celebrating the promise for creating a more realistic yet optimistic view of life. Again, it depends on the person and the trauma. An activity we've found helpful when working with people who are struggling in the aftermath of trauma is to ask them to become the professional. The ability to look outward and to focus on providing support, guidance, and advice to others is a great way to temporarily separate yourself from your distress. It also promotes insight into ways you can move past your own stuck points.

EXERCISE: Being the Therapist

Assume you are a psychologist, counselor, or social worker who has been asked to help Erin, whose story follows. Read the story and then answer the questions in the space provided.

Late one evening, after walking back to her car in a shopping mall parking lot, Erin was pulled into a van against her will. She was beaten, raped, and tossed out on the side of the road and left to die. Erin now leaves her apartment only to attend classes and to go grocery shopping. She avoids spending time with her friends and rarely calls her parents anymore. She ruminates about the assault and believes she can never trust another man. At some level, she believes that the life she has known is over and she is destined to live a sad and fearful life.

1. What would you say or do to help Erin understand the emotions she is currently experiencing?

2. How would you help Erin understand the process of grief? What are some ways she can start to overcome her intense feelings of loss?

3. What advice can you give Erin that will help her reach out to others? How can she make a plan to do this?

4. What are some of the potential losses she may feel as a result of her assault? And what are some ways in which she can mourn those losses?

5. Assuming Erin has made progress in dealing with her feelings of loss and grief, what do you believe would be the next steps in her journey toward growth?

6. Does thinking about Erin's situation provide insight into what to do about your own sense of loss and grief?

7. Do you believe the guidance and advice you provided Erin would work for you? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

8. Who in your life can help you deal with your loss and grief and help you explore new possibilities in life? Who are they and how would they be helpful? (You might return to chapter 6 to identify possible expert companions.)

We hope that this exercise helped you recognize some ways to manage your own feelings of loss and grief. Sometimes it helps to take a step back from your own situation.

Taking a step back from your own struggles and focusing on the struggles of others may help you gain clarity. It also reinforces the important process of serving others in their time of need, as others have been of help to us.

A Path to New Possibilities

Life meaning and purpose is not something that is stumbled upon or that you just wake up to one morning and magically possess. It can be difficult to imagine what new possibilities and pathways are available or what would make life richer. But meaning and purpose are not so much discovered as created. Instead of waiting for them to come to you, you have to seek them out. It takes creativity.

To start, it will help to focus on the value of what you have rather than on what the trauma has taken from you. We acknowledge that this may seem Pollyannaish, naive, or overly optimistic. However, the reality is that trauma is something that happened to you. The trauma is not who you are or what defines you. You are a complex individual, and there is a lot more to who you are as a person. We concede that it may be difficult to value those things that gave you satisfaction and meaning in your life before you experienced trauma. After trauma, you may still have many of those things in your life, but your perspective has shifted. As noted earlier in the book, trauma is akin to an earthquake that shakes the foundation of how you see yourself. That's why many trauma survivors find it helpful to ask for the perspectives of others.

Who better to help you identify your blind spots than someone who knows you, cares about you, and can be honest with you? And what is more powerful, therapeutic, or freeing than knowing that someone close to you recognizes your value, worth, and goodness in spite of what happened to you? Other people can help you remember what motivated you and kept you going before the trauma. The trick is to identify those people who are most likely to be of help and then seek out their assistance. It may be someone you have already identified as an expert companion, or it may be someone you haven't yet considered. It may be several people, or it may be only one. It may be someone who may not know you well but is someone you know to be honest, insightful, and caring.

This next exercise will take someone else's perspective to help you see what you have in your life that you can still be grateful for.

EXERCISE: Finding Gratitude

Think of someone who would be able to identify those things in your life that provided you with meaning, purpose, worth, and satisfaction before your trauma. Then answer the questions.

1. Who is this person in your life?
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2. What are five things this person would likely say you should be grateful for?

3. For each of those five things, what would the person say that would possibly interfere with your being thankful? What are some obstacles in the way?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

We hope this exercise helped you to see that there are things in your life to be grateful for. Sometimes it just takes looking at things from a different perspective.

Gratitude is defined simply as being thankful. It is the ability to appreciate what you or others have and the ability to give and receive kindness. Sometimes stepping outside of yourself can help you see what you can still be grateful for.

Next we'd like you to engage in some self-reflection to identify some possible areas for finding greater meaning and purpose.

The Path Behind

Hindsight may or may not actually be 20/20, but it can be revealing. Again, feelings of loss and grief make it difficult to fully appreciate those things in your life that have given you meaning and purpose. You've basically lost focus. One way to regain that focus is to reconsider your past. If you deliberately spend time reflecting on what your life was like before the trauma, then you are likely to identify various people, places, and things that gave you meaning. Maybe it was the desire to further your education or learn a trade. Maybe it was a relationship that was growing or on the mend but which got sidetracked because of the trauma. The next exercise will assist you in remembering.

EXERCISE: Looking Back

Think back to your life prior to your trauma and then answer the questions in the space provided:

1. Who in your life provided meaning and purpose?

2. Are these people still a source of meaning and purpose in your life? If not, can anything be done to change this?

3. What things (experiences, places, possessions, and so on) in your life provided meaning and purpose?

4. Are they still a source of meaning and purpose in your life? If not, can anything be done to change this?

A deliberate, compassionate, and thoughtful self-reflection about the past can help you uncover what has been hidden.

The Path Ahead

Instead of looking into the past, now we want you to peer into your crystal ball. Spend some time imagining what your life would look like if you could write your life story. What people, places, or things would you like to write into your life that would give you meaning and purpose? Be creative and don't limit yourself. You are the storyteller and have complete control over the narrative. If you find this activity difficult, don't worry. Creating a new life narrative will be covered in more detail in the final chapter. This exercise will help you get started.

EXERCISE: Looking Forward

Envision what your life will look like in the future and answer the questions in the space provided.

1. What people would you like to have in your future who can provide meaning and purpose for you?

2. Why would these people be a source of meaning and purpose for you?

3. What can you do to bring these people into your life?

4. What things (experiences, places, possessions, and so on) would you like to have in your future that can provide meaning and purpose for you?

5. Why would they be a source of meaning and purpose for you?

6. What can you do to bring these things into your life?

Now is the time to consider what your future will look like and what you will need. Being able to identify this puts you in a great position to live a full and rewarding life. Even if you don't have a sense of meaning and purpose now, imagining what your future can look like is a step toward getting there.

The Path Never Taken

Each and every one of us can look back on our life and identify missed opportunities. Sometimes we may tell ourselves we'll come back to it later, and other times we make a choice while not fully understanding its impact. Regardless of the reasons, the past is full of possibilities that were never seized. This next exercise will help you explore if you could benefit from rediscovering those paths never taken.

EXERCISE: A Different Direction

Take an honest appraisal of those things in your past that, if acted on now or in the future, would potentially provide you with meaning and purpose. Then answer the questions in the space provided.

1. Were there opportunities in your life to connect with someone who would have enriched your life, but for some reason you chose not to establish a connection? If so, who was that person? Why did you decide not to connect with this person?

2. Could you connect with this person now or in the future? If so, how would you go about it?

3. Were there any missed opportunities to participate in activities, relationships, or endeavors that you could consider now or in the future? If so, what were they, and why did you decide not to pursue these things?

4. Are the opportunities to pursue these things available to you now or possibly available in the future?

This exercise asked you to look back at paths never taken and explore why you didn't go in certain directions. Sometimes revisiting missed opportunities can bring new meaning and purpose to your life.

Finding new possibilities for growth takes careful consideration. It also requires you to be patient with yourself and to show self-compassion. We understand how easy it is to be critical of things you've done or not done. We also know that reflecting on the past can be associated with painful memories. We ask that you do your best to push aside those hurtful memories and focus instead on what life has given you and can give you now. What are you thankful for? What people in your life build you up? Are there unfinished parts of the past that would enrich your life now? These are all questions you must ask yourself and those around you who know and care about you.

Identifying the Mission

Once you are able to identify areas of potential growth, you can focus your efforts on developing a sense of mission. Some refer to having a mission as altruism, or acting for others. It's the process of putting the needs of others ahead of your own, which in turn provides meaning and purpose for yourself. You can also look at it as the process of developing service-oriented goals.

Finding meaning and purpose in your life doesn't necessarily have to be altruistic or service oriented. For example, a strong spiritual or religious connection could provide meaning and purpose in your life. However, as part of that spiritual or religious connection, you could also decide that your purpose and meaning comes not just from this connection but also from a desire to help others find spiritual or religious meaning too. In our experience, most people find that placing service to others at the core of their personal growth gives them the greatest satisfaction.

As you navigate the process of posttraumatic growth, we want you to consider a few questions. Does serving others fit within your life goals? Does it seem to align with how you see yourself or how you believe others see you? What are the benefits and limitations of putting the needs of others along with or in front of your own? Once you can answer these questions, you will be well beyond where most people exist.

We will lead you through some steps that can help you to develop a service-oriented way of interacting with people, or a mission that will benefit others. Even a small step in this direction will enable you to experience posttraumatic growth. Here are some questions to help you reflect on who in your life could be a model of service and mission, someone who has been down this path already.

EXERCISE: Finding Models of Service and Mission

Name some people who have been models of service and mission for you in these different parts of your life.

From your childhood and adolescence: _____

Family members: _____

Teachers: _____

Religious figures: _____

Neighbors: _____

Coaches: _____

Friends: _____

Families of friends: _____

Business people: _____

Police officers or others in authority: _____

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Name any others that don't fit into the above list: _____

Name some people present in your life now who are models of service to others:

Now choose someone from the list you just made and describe as specifically as possible what that person did that you consider a service or a mission. Consider the actions—behaviors, activities, or commitments—that defined that service.

Person: _____

Mission or service: _____

Specific actions: _____

The purpose of this exercise was to get you thinking about what you could do to create a new sense of purpose. Having a mission like the people you described may seem foreign to you. If so, you might think of talking with them, if possible, about their motives in engaging in good works and how they discovered ways to do this.

Be aware that there are many people who have missions that you would not know about. It's possible to give anonymously. Consider the following story.

Emily is a businesswoman who travels the same route each day to work. This route takes her past a small park that gets little use. On many days, she noticed a man in the park who was often sitting at a picnic table reading a book. He was poorly dressed and always alone. One day, she noticed he was not at the table, and she decided to walk into the park to see if he was okay. She soon spotted the same man sitting outside a shabby tent near the back of the park. He was clearly homeless. She kept at a distance and did not think he saw her. She decided she would like to help him but was wary about approaching. She left the park and thought about what to do. She decided that each day as she drove by, she would check to see if the man was at the table and would leave something for him if he were not there. On her way to work, she would carry something with her and just leave it at the table when he wasn't there. On various occasions, she left clothing, food, and books. She thought of herself as his secret benefactor. She enjoyed the idea that all he knew was that some kind person was out there who noticed him and showed some caring and compassion.

The next exercise will help you identify your own mission. You may be able to help people you know well or people with whom you have only passing contact. Or like Mary, whom you met at the beginning of this chapter, you may wish to help others who have gone through experiences similar to yours.

EXERCISE: Identifying Your Mission

Identify people whom you have some contact with in daily life and whom you might be able to assist in some way. You can include other living beings besides people or other things of importance to you that could be involved in a service or mission that you define. Name these people or things in the different parts of your life listed here.

At work: _____

At school: _____

In the neighborhood: _____

Family: _____

Friends: _____

On the Internet: _____

At stores and businesses: _____

Other people or things of possible importance in your daily environment: _____

Are there certain people whom you identify with or empathize with because of your trauma?

Now choose someone or something from the list you just made and describe as specifically as possible what you might be able to do that you consider a service or a mission. Name the actions—specific behaviors, activities, or commitments—that would define your service.

Person or focus of service: _____

Mission or service: _____

Specific actions to take: _____

These ideas could be small steps to take to start a process of living with a greater sense of purpose, or they could be great challenges for you. Sometimes it is good to have a mixture of both, so that you define for yourself short-term and long-term goals.

A Commitment to Serve

A newfound sense of purpose is unlikely to suddenly appear as you begin to pursue your mission but is more likely to develop over time. It will be important to commit to an activity or set of activities for at least several weeks before you evaluate how this may be affecting you. That said, it's also important to be flexible about this process. Think of this as exploring possibilities. Your commitment should be to explore and create your purpose and to test out missions of service. Your missions can evolve over time as new possibilities present themselves. You are likely to find your possibilities increasing as you engage people in your attempts to serve. And as you do so, you will most likely discover that you got more out of it than you believe you have given.