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DIMENSIONS OF LIFE MEANING AS FACTORS OF COPING*

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Abstract: In the study the relationship of meaning in life and the preference of coping strategies in late adolescence is examined. Three meaning dimensions were measured: intensity, a level at which the individual perceives that his/her life has meaning and purpose; the breadth, a number of sources, which the individual derives meaning from (a number of different values in one's life); and depth, a level of self-transcendence of meaning in life. For coping with frustration Rosenzweig's Picture-Frustration Test, adapted for recognizing coping strategies, was used. Research done with a sample of 166 adolescents showed positive relationship of meaningfulness and constructive strategies as well as positive relationship of meaninglessness and the preference of aggressive strategies. Depth of life meaning was found as the strongest predictor of coping strategies. Individuals with more self-transcendent values tended, to a greater extent, to use constructive strategies, and, on the contrary, individuals with self-focusing values used more aggressive strategies.

Key words: meaning of life, dimensions of life meaning, stress, coping

The effort to understand and promote successful managing of stress and loading situations have lead to searching for factors positively influencing the process of coping. One of the factors discussed with managing stress is meaning of life. The topic of life meaning has often been presented in works of psychologists and therapists, especially those focused existentially (e.g., I.D. Yalom, R. May, J. Fabry). Great progress has been made especially by V.E. Frankl's logotherapy, where the central point is *"will to meaning"*, the man's need to find and fulfill meaning in life (Frankl, 1997). Frankl also propounded the role of meaning in the process of coping, when he drew from his forced stay in the concentration camp during World War II. There he not-

iced that those who succeeded to safeguard the meaning and hope, better coped with everyday suffering and pain in the camp.

Since that time, the psychological view on life meaning has developed in the theoretical, methodological and therapeutic areas. Several studies have presented their findings about positive relationship of life meaningfulness and well-being (Balcar, 1995; Zika, Chamberlain, 1992), and positive relationship of existential vacuum (life meaninglessness) and negative psychological phenomena as depression (Reker, 1997), alcohol and drug addictions (Kokosinska, 1992; Waisberg, Porter, 1994). Also, the relationship of meaning and stress has been examined. S. Zika and K. Chamberlain (1987) found that the level of meaningfulness correlates negatively with experienced level of daily stress. Reker's research (Reker, 1999a) showed that sense of life meaning helps to the elderly to cope positively with involuntary changes. Findings concerning

the role of meaning in moderating stress have been manifested in several theories focusing on the processes of coping and the impact of stress on people's health. The dimension meaningfulness can be found, for example, in Antonovsky's model Sense of Coherence. Also, Maddi's and Kobasa's concept of hardiness contains the component commitment referring to active involvement in the world, which is very close to the meaning concepts. P.T.P. Wong (see Van Ranst, Marcoen, 2000), in his *resource-congruence model*, states that availability of sufficient resources and their appropriate utilization is essential to effective coping. According to him, meaning is a major psychological resource that can be used in times of need. C.L. Park and S. Folkman (1997) distinguish two levels of meaning: *global meaning* - people's basic goals and fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the world and themselves, and *situational meaning* - appraisal of concrete life situation and its demands. Situational meaning influences how people cope with these situations and their outcomes. According to them, the process of coping consists of meaning-appraising and meaning-making processes. At first, a person appraises the meaning of the stressful situation, and then compares whether global and situational meaning is in congruence. Incongruence and dissonance between these levels of meaning cause distress and an effort to alleviate it. Meaning-making coping embodies the process of reappraisal and changing situational and/or global meaning till they are in congruence. Changes of situational meaning involve, especially, the explaining the causality of the situation, raising the control over the situation and perceiving benefits from the event. Changes in global meaning come mainly when

great loss or negative stressful event occurs and it is impossible to change the situational meaning to be in congruence with global meaning. These changes often lead to the revision of fundamental beliefs and value system, and rebuilding of the goal hierarchy. One of the examples of global meaning changes can be religious conversion.

Dimensions of life meaning

Many research studies of life meaning have treated life meaning as *intensity of meaningfulness*. Their authors have measured sense of meaning of life, level at which individual experience his/her life as meaningful, and have found a relationship between meaning and other psychological constructs. Several authors have reflected meaning of life to be a more complex construct and they have often discussed it in different aspects, called *dimensions* (O'Connor, Chamberlain, 1996; Reker, 2000). P.T.P. Wong (1998) propose three components of personal meaning:

a) *cognitive* - cognitive framework, which contains beliefs, attitudes and values,

b) *motivational* - pursuit of worthwhile goals and activities,

c) *affective* - feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment flowing from worthwhile activities and life goals.

G.T. Reker (2000) presents another three meaning dimension:

- *sources of meaning* - refers to content of meaning experiences and includes values, goals and beliefs,

- *breadth of meaning* - number of meaning sources (extension or variety of life values),

- *depth of meaning* - level of self-transcendence of meaning sources.

Concerning the breadth of meaning, different studies give average number of 4 to 7 important life values, which the meaning can be drawn from (Reker, 2000; O'Connor, Chamberlain, 1996; Ebersole, 1998).

In literature, three and four degree conceptions of meaning depth are known. K. Popielski (1994) distinguishes three levels of values in his categorization:

- values related to *physical* dimension and physical needs,

- values related to *psychological* dimension, which are tied with psychological needs,

- and values related to *noetic* dimension, which transcend the person as himself.

G.T. Reker (1996) proposes four levels of meaning depth:

1) *self-preoccupation* - searching for hedonistic pleasure and comfort,

2) *individualism* - realization of personal potential,

3) *collectivism* - focusing on others and larger societal and political cause,

4) *self-transcendence* - values that transcend individuals and encompass cosmic meaning.

An evaluation of Reker's categorization by factor analysis showed that levels three and four create one factor, which N. Van Ranst and A. Marcoen (2000) included in the common name self-transcendence.

The period of adolescence

As it is well known from ontogenetic psychology, adolescence is one of the specific periods in developing meaning of life. In this period young people start to think and speak about existential matters to a greater extent. They ask about the direction and fundamentals of their life, they philosophize about such things as truth, freedom, etc. This is the outcome of

the development of abstract thinking, appearing just in this period. New directions and opportunities are opened to a young person and he/she is forced to choose and carry responsibility for his/her own life. The development of abstract thinking causes a need for reinterpretation of individual's meaning of life, which has been, until now, experienced mostly through the parents' or other adults' mediating. Several authors as V.E. Frankl (1997), D.J. Hacker (1994), P.M. Fry (1998) emphasize adolescence as a period when a young person has to face and cope with existential matters. The main life task of an adolescent is to build an identity and create his/her meaning of life, which is the identity's main component. Failing to cope with this task can bring more intensive experiencing of stress and by this way also decrease the ability to cope with life demands.

Aim of the study

The study intends to be a possible contribution to examining the relationship between life meaning and coping with stress. Based on the mentioned theories and assumptions, we decided to measure three meaning dimensions: intensity of meaningfulness, breadth of meaning and depth of meaning. Also, research focuses on the period of adolescence, since we suppose problem of life meaning playing a specific role in the process of coping in this period.

METHOD

The research sample consisted of 166 adolescents in age ranging from 17-19, mean age 17.5 years. 64 of them were men and 102 women. All of them were seniors at a high school in a Slovak town with a population of about 50 000 inhabitants.

Measuring coping strategies

Rosenzweig's Picture-Frustration Test was used to determine coping strategies. This experimental-projective approach is an alternative to often used self-reporting methods and can be helpful in reducing errors derived from the subject's social desirability. In our research the version of the test derived by M. Falat (1999) to determine coping strategies was used. The test contained eight situations with two persons, where one of the persons is blocked or accused by the other one. The subject is asked to write the first answer he/she presumes the frustrated person would say. Answers received from every

subject were sorted into four categories:
  ◆ *constructive* (subject is trying to solve problems with consideration and respect to other people)
  ◆ *aggressive* (subject is aggressively attacking, accusing or threatening someone else or him/herself),
  ◆ *avoiding* (subject is avoiding to cope with frustration and, usually, by reinterpreting some aspects of a situation, presents it as non-frustrating)
  ◆ *confirmation of problem without solving it* (subject confirms the existence of a problem and frustration, but does not suggest any solutions).

The average number of individual types of answers per person in the whole sample is shown in Figure 1.
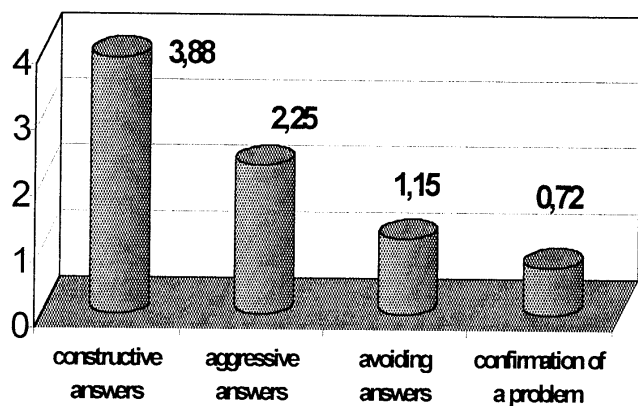

Figure 1. Average number of different types of answers (absolute values) in the whole sample per one respondent

Measuring meaning dimensions

Intensity (sense) of meaningfulness was measured by three questionnaire characteristics. Two of them are dimensions of Reker's Life Attitude Profile (Reker, 1999b). *Personal Meaning Index* is defined as having life goals, life mission, and a logically integrated and consistent understanding of self, others and life in general. *Existential Vacuum* is a negative characteristic referring to lack of goals and meaning, presence of boredom, apathy and feelings of indifference. The third characteristic was the dimension *meaningfulness* of Antonovsky's *Sense of Coherence* - defined as experiencing demands and life as a whole as being worthy of energy investment and commitment.

Both *breadth and depth of meaning* were investigated by the original *Questionnaire of Life Meaning Sources* (Halama, unpublished). Its development was stimulated by limited features of tools, used for investigating meaning sources in the past. The quantitative ones did not consider the essence of the concrete value, and, for example, they evaluated depth without additionally recognizing its content. The qualitative methods, which approach the sources from the phenomenological point of view, are thorough, but they are demanding in marking and evaluating.

This questionnaire combines both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. It contains a list of about 20 values (health, family, work, etc.). At first, the subject is asked to choose from an offered list of all these values, which he/she is committed to and which contribute to his/her sense of meaningfulness. Then he/she is asked to evaluate every chosen item by numbers

from 1 to 5 according to its importance in her/his life (1 - very weak value, it contributes by very small amount to overall sense of meaningfulness ... 5 - absolutely important, I can't imagine life without it). Thirdly, the subject is asked to describe every chosen value in regard to what it gives to her/his life and what it means for her/him. At the end, if the subject is not satisfied with the possibilities offered in the list, he/she can add her/his own specific values, evaluate and describe them. The data obtained enable us to find several quantitative and qualitative characteristics and also, to create a graphical representation of the value structure called Meaning Profile.

As *meaning breadth indicators* we used three different coefficients, which were derived from the questionnaire:
  ◆ *Breadth 1* - number of all values, which the subject chose,
  ◆ *Breadth 2* - number of "strong" values, it means number of chosen values, evaluated with importance 4 or 5,
  ◆ *Breadth 3* - total sum of all value evaluations.

In order to examine the relationship of *depth of meaning* and coping strategies, the sample was divided into 4 groups. At first in the process of dividing, every single subject's value was assessed in regard to its level of self-transcendence on the base of the subject's description. During the process of evaluating we were inspired by publicized theories (Popielski, 1994; Reker, 1996) and by the contents of the data acquired. Four categories of meaning depth for values were used. Three of them were following the mentioned theories and one was created with consideration of the data content. In brackets, examples of the description with different evaluation of the value "work" are presented:

♦ *1 - self-preoccupation* - value representing the orientation to self-profit and effort toward meeting basic needs (work - *I have to earn money somehow*),

♦ *2A - social support and searching for intimacy* - value focused on social relationships (family, friends, partners, etc.) and support received from them (work - *I have friends who help me there*),

♦ *2B - self-realization* - value expressing the effort toward one's self-development and realization of one's own potential (work - *it helps me to improve my skills*),

♦ *3 - self-transcendence* - value that transcends the self toward other people (service and helping), the benefit of a bigger whole or ultimate meaning (work - *I think every man should contribute to the development of the world by his work*).

The categories are described in the order from the least deep to the deepest one. Some authors (e.g., Popielski, 1994) consider groups 2A and 2B to be at the same level (to be related to the same psychological dimension), but in some theories they are not considered to be at the same level (e.g., Maslow's theory of needs). Because of the clear distinction between them in content of descriptions, they were considered and examined as separate depth levels.

The subjects were sorted into four different groups according to their deepest reported "strong" value. It means that if the subject had reported at least one value with the importance of 4 or 5 evaluated as self-transcendent value, he/she was included among individuals of self-transcendence. If he/she had reported a value of self-realization as his/her deepest "strong" value (he/she had no self-transcendent value), he/she was in the group of individuals of self-realization, and the like. It is notable, that nearly all of subjects also reported lower values along with this

deepest one (e.g., if a subject reported some value assessed as a self-realization and it was his/her deepest value, he/she also reported the lower values assessed as self-preoccupation and social support searching). This is the way four groups of subjects were created:

1- individuals of pre-occupation (10 %),
2A - individuals searching for social support and intimacy (41%),
2B - individuals of self-realization (19%),
3 - individuals of self-transcendence (30%).

In Table 1, numbers of subjects belonging to different groups are presented. There were only 162 subjects, because 4 subjects did not provide enough materials to be possible to classify them.

Table 1. Number of subjects belonging to individual groups of meaning depth

1- self-preoccupation	17
2A - social support and intimacy searching	67
2B - self-realization	30
3 - self-transcendence	48

RESULTS

Intensity of meaningfulness

At first, correlate analysis of the meaningfulness and meaninglessness indicators and number of individual types of answers to the blocking situations was made. As seen from Table 2, there is only one significant coefficient - positive relationship between Existential Vacuum and number of aggressive answers. The data were also analyzed by hierarchical cluster analysis

of the variables. A dendrogram of meaning measure tools and the types of answers, using the Ward method, is presented in Figure 2. As seen, indicators of meaningfulness are tied with constructive answers, and Existential Vacuum (indicator of meaninglessness) is tied to aggressive answers.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation coefficients between the meaningfulness and meaninglessness indicators and the number of individual types of answers

	CA	AgA	AvA	CoP
PMI	-0.01 p = 0.898	0.04 p = 0.652	0.07 p = 0.386	-0.12 p = 0.123
SOCMEAN	0.06 p = 0.426	-0.02 p = 0.774	-0.02 p = 0.782	-0.12 p = 0.135
EXVACUUM	-0.03 p = 0.692	0.18 p = 0.025	-0.14 p = 0.068	-0.05 p = 0.525

PMI - Personal Meaning Index
SOCMEAN - SOC meaningfulness
EXVACUUM - Existential Vacuum

CA - Constructive Answers
AgA - Aggressive Answers
AvA - Avoiding Answers
CoP - Confirmation of Problem

Dendrogram using Ward Method

Rescaled Distance Cluster Combine

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             0         5        10        15        20        25
Label        +---------+---------+---------+---------+---------+

PMI          ─┐
SOCMEAN       ─┘                          ┌──────────────┐
CA            ──────────────────┘         │
AgA           ──────────────┐             │
EXVACUUM      ──────────────┘──────┐      │
CoP           ───────────────────┘ │
AvA           ───────────────────────┘
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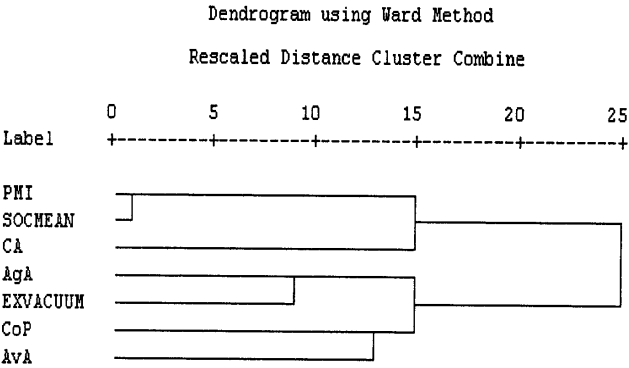
Figure 2. Dendrogram of meaningfulness and meaninglessness indicators and individual types of answers

Breadth of meaning

The same kind of analysis was used to examine the relationships between breadth of meaning and coping strategies. As seen from Table 3, no correlation coefficient is significant. On the other hand, a more sensitive cluster analysis revealed that three meaning breadth coefficients create one cluster with constructive answers, and the other negative answers create another cluster (see dendrogram in the Figure 3).

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between the breadth of meaning indicators and the number of individual types of answers

	CR	AgA	AvA	CoP
BREADTH 1	0.08 p = 0.290	-0.06 p = 0.428	-0.06 p = 0.378	0.04 p = 0.586
BREADTH 2	0.13 p = 0.087	-0.02 p = 0.706	-0.13 p = 0.093	-0.03 p = 0.691
BREADTH 3	0.13 p = 0.096	-0.07 p = 0.340	-0.1 p = 0.192	0.01 p = 0.817

Breadth 1 - number of all values
Breadth 2 - number of "strong" values
Breadth 3 - sum of the value evaluations

CA - Constructive Answers
AgA - Aggressive Answers
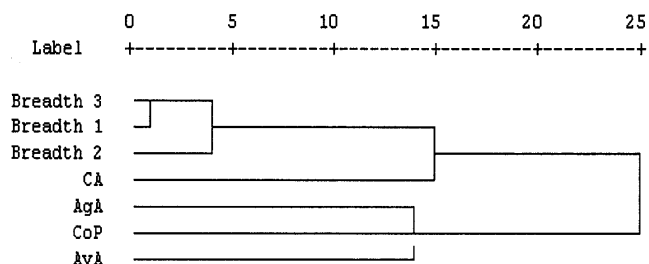AvA - Avoiding Answers
CoP - Confirmation of Problem

Figure 3. Dendrogram of the meaning breadth indicators and individual types of answers

Depth of meaning

To examine the relationship between depth of meaning and individual types of answers, we compared the average number of individual answers in the meaning depth groups. In Figure 4, the average number of all types of answers in individual groups is shown. An increasing tendency of constructive answers and a decreasing tendency of aggressive answers with the increase of meaning depth are evident.

As not every group had normal distribution of answers, in order to examine the differences between groups, we used Kruskal-Walis non-parametric ANOVA. For results see Table 4. Significant differences were found between average number of constructive answers and average number of aggressive answers.
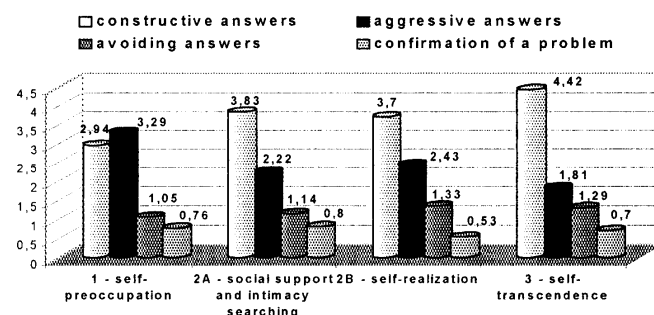

Figure 4. Average number of individual types of answers in groups with different meaning depth

Table 4. Kruskal-Walis non-parametric analysis of variance of individual types of answers in groups with different meaning depth

		Constructive Answers	Aggressive Answers	Avoiding Answers	Confirmation of Problem
1- self-preoccupation		2.94	3.29	1.05	0.76
2A - social support and intimacy searching		3.83	2.22	1.14	0.8
2B - self-realization		3.7	2.43	1.33	0.53
3 - self-transcendence		4.42	1.81	1.06	0.7
Results of Kruskal-Walis non-parametric ANOVA	χ^2	9.33	11.37	1.29	1.9
	Sig.	p = 0.02	p = 0.01	p = 0.72	p = 0.59

Mann-Whitney U test was used to find the differences between individual groups. Results of U-tests concerning the differences in number of constructive answers are presented in Table 5 and the ones concerning the differences in the number of aggressive answers are in Table 6. There is a difference between groups 1 and 3 (self-transcendence and self-preoccupation) with a smaller significance compared to ANOVA significance, both in the number of constructive

and aggressive answers. Individuals in group 3 - self-tran- scendence - reacted more in a constructive way than did individuals in group 1 - self-preoccupation, who, on the other hand, reacted more in an aggressive way. Apart from this difference, thère are also some differences with marginal significance, which indicates an increasing tendency of constructive answers and decreasing tendency of aggressive answers with deepening of meaning.

Table 5. Comparing means of average number of constructive answers between groups with different meaning depth

Level of meaning depth	Average number of constructive answers	Comparing means between individual groups (Mann-Whitney U-test)		
		1	2A	2B
1- self-preoccupation	2.94	-----		
2A - social support and intimacy searching	3.83	U = 431.5 p = 0.110	-----	
2B - self-realization	3.7	U = 166.0 p = 0.043	U = 994.5 p = 0.933	-----
3 - self-transcendence	4.42	U = 219.0 p = 0.004	U = 1291.5 p = 0.069	U = 563.5 p = 0.103

Table 6. Comparing means of average number of aggressive answers between groups with different meaning depth

	Average number of aggressive answers	Comparing means between individual groups (Mann-Whitney U-test)		
Level of meaning depth		1	2A	2B
1- self-preoccupation	3.29	-----		
2A - social support and intimacy searching	2.22	U = 371.0 p = 0.023	-----	
2B - self-realization	243	U = 183.0 p = 0.102	U = 920.0 p = 0.497	-----
3- self-transcendence	1.81	U = 201.0 p = 0.001	U = 1341.0 p = 0.121	U = 531.0 p = 0.046

DISCUSSION

Concerning the intensity of meaningfulness, a weak positive relationship between existential vacuum and number of aggressive answers (revealed both by bivariate and multivariate analyses) gives partial support to some assumptions and findings about the relationships of meaninglessness and negative coping (e.g., Frankl, 1999; Lukas, 1997). Concerning adolescence, V.E. Frankl proves existential vacuum as a source of aggression especially among young delinquents, and he suggests a solution in helping them with finding meaningful goals. Frankl's suggestion is supported also by the results of cluster analysis, which imply a connection of meaningfulness and positive coping.

A positive relationship between the coefficients of meaning breadth and the number of constructive answers was revealed only by multivariate analysis (correlation coefficients failed to confirm this relationship). The results therefore give limited back-up for the extension of meaning as possible source of positive coping.

Depth was revealed as the strongest factor of positive coping, of all the considered aspects of meaning. Significant differences and differences with marginal significance show the tendency of an increasing number of constructive strategies and decreasing number of aggressive strategies with increasing depth of meaning. It suggests that focusing on pre-occupation and self-comfort can lead to lowered ability of positive and constructive coping with stress and thereafter to compensation by aggressive strategies. On the other hand, individuals with deep values, beliefs and goals can use these as sources of active and constructive coping. In this specific research situation, self-

transcendent values including also focusing on others (helping, service) can serve as congruent source to stress situations in Rosenzweig's test, which have social context.

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, the results support the assumption about the role of life meaning as a source of positive coping strategies and its relationship with processes of stress management. In spite of the expected important role of meaning in adolescence, the relatively small intensity of some found relationships does not allow us to consider meaning as a cardinal factor of coping in this period. However, the evident connection between depth of meaning and the preference of coping strategies implies that meaning of life and mainly its content have to be included, along with other influencing factors, in the reflection of stress management process of coping.

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DIMENZIE ZMYSLU ŽIVOTA AKO FAKTORY ZVLÁDANIA

P. H a l a m a

Súhrn: V štúdii bol overovaný vzťah medzi zmyslom života a preferenciou zvládacích stratégií v neskorej adolescencii. Autor bral do úvahy tri dimenzie zmyslu života: intenzitu - úroveň v akej jednotlivec vníma, že jeho život má zmysel; šírku zmyslu - počet hodnôt, ktoré človeku slúžia ako zdroj zmyslu života, a hĺbku zmyslu - stupeň seba-transcendencie zmyslu života. Na zisťovanie zvládacích stratégií bol použitý Rosenzweigov Obrázkovo-frustračný test, adaptovaný na tieto účely. Výskum na vzorke 166 adolescentov ukázal pozitívny vzťah zmysluplnosti a konštruktívnych stratégií ako aj pozitívny vzťah nedostatku životného zmyslu a preferenciou agresívnych stratégií. hĺbka zmyslu sa ukázala ako najsilnejší prediktor zvládacích stratégií. Osoby s hlbším zmyslom života (s prítomnými sebatranscendentými hodnotami) mali vo väčšej miere tendenciu používať konštruktívne stratégie, a naopak osoby s hodnotami zameranými na seba používali viac agresívne stratégie.