

REVIEW

Life Goals and Mental Health

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Abstract

It is an irrefutable fact that mankind has had goals in life since the very beginning. The pursuit of goals in life is one of the factors that protect mental health and improve quality of life. However, not only going after a goal in life but also what the actual goal is has an important effect on mental health. Life goals can be classified into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Intrinsic goals can include a contribution to society, personal development, inter-personal relationships, and physical health while extrinsic goals can be to become famous and to be physically attractive and wealthy. Intrinsic goals are related with people's nature, needs, and relationships with their environment whereas extrinsic goals are related with goals that are shaped by the culture they are in, related with recognition, acceptance, and achieving results expected by others. Therefore, these two goal categories do not have the same effect on mental health. The purpose of this review is to investigate literature information concerning the effects of goals in life and their sub-dimensions and the effect of internal-extrinsic goals on mental health.

Keywords: Extrinsic goals, health, intrinsic goals, life goals, mental health

Introduction

Goals have always been important in people's lives. By having goals in life, people do not only plan their lives but also have guidance and orientation about their development and lives (Eryilmaz, 2014). Many factors, such as developmental periods, different parental attitudes during developmental periods, generational differences, economic and cultural characteristics of the society in which they live, all play a role in the formation and development of goals. However, although culture on its own does not have an apparent effect on how goals are selected, the contribution of one's culture to that person's attitudes, judgments, and goals should not be overlooked (Marbell-Pierre et al., 2019). People who have goals in life are observed to be more connected to life, handle challenges better, have better skills to find solutions to problems, and biologically survive longer (Aydin et al., 2015). When people talk about being happy and having a meaningful life what they actually talk about are their goals, objectives, and expectations in life. Knowing one's goals in life will help to understand the present and the future (Brdar et al., 2009; Koçak & Ak, 2015). Goals are classified into two groups: daily goals and life goals. Goals about the things one will do during the day are daily goals. Life goals have a more comprehensive scope; these are the goals that affect one's life in the long term such as through years instead of months or days (Atherton et al., 2021). In other words, life goals are the

goals of people about what they would do in their life and about their desires (Eryilmaz, 2014; Getir, 2015). Life goals are generally permanent personal efforts characteristically attempted by people and represent their thoughts about who they want to be and what kind of lives they want to lead (Lau et al., 2015; Zhang, 2021).

Goals give a meaning to life which organizes and encourages goals and manages behavior. Another factor that creates a sense of meaning in life is good mental health. Mental health is defined as successful adaptation to stressors, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are compatible with cultural norms and are age-appropriate. For this reason, having a lifelong purpose is in a positive relationship with mental health, as it makes current and past life meaningful and strengthens the ability to cope with sources of stress (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). An important factor here is to have meaningful goals. It is well established that the pursuit of personally meaningful goals is advantageous for various indicators of subjective well-being and psychological well-being (Bühler et al., 2019). In addition to subjective and psychological well-being, it is also considered as an indicator of physical health (Burrow et al., 2014; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Having a goal in life has always been considered a part of positive health and well-being for centuries. People who follow their goals in life are found to have better mental and physical health

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Cite this article as: Yatmaz, G., & Sala Razi, G. (2022). Life goals and mental health. *Mediterranean Nursing and Midwifery*, 2(1) 41-45.



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Received: April 19, 2022
Accepted: May 19, 2022

than the people who do not (Hill et al., 2016). Having a goal in life organizes one's behavior and sense of self. For this, long-term goal orientation is required. The feeling of having a goal in life leads to a higher level of self-confidence, goal orientation, happiness, academic success, and altruism (Blattner et al., 2013; Zilioli et al., 2015). Having a goal is considered as a source of coping and plays an important role in overcoming psychological problems. This can act as a buffer against negative effects of problems. Therefore, having a goal can play a protective and preventive role against harmful behavior such as substance abuse and addictions such as online gaming (Martin et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2013). On the other hand, despite their negative effects on mental and physical health, people continue to abuse alcohol and drugs, to smoke, to overeat, and engage in risky sexual behavior. Doing the above constantly removes people away from some of their life goals such as health and safety (Kopetz & Woerner, 2021). Someone can have more than one life goal in different areas that are not connected (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). However, while some people have more than one goal, it is also possible to have no goal at all (Rijavec et al., 2011). Having any kind of life goal results in a positive functionality contrary to having no goal (Cotton Bronk et al., 2009). Several factors including age, gender, personal characteristics, marital status, occupation, socio-economic condition, culture, and health can affect life goals (Kaya & Mukba, 2017; Oğluz & Yılmaz, 2016). For example, energy and resources reserved to achieve a goal decrease with age. Older people might have already achieved some of their goals, decided that their goals are no longer important, or come to the conclusion that these goals are not attainable. Compared to younger people, older people have more health goals and relatively less number of goals for their professional lives and careers (Bühler et al., 2019). Another example can be that extrinsic goals such as financial gain become more important and moral goals and values tend to be more ignored by people and in countries with lower socio-economic conditions (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Additionally, life goals can also be affected both by positive and negative experiences in life. Sudden and unexpected situations in one's life can change the course of that person's life goals (Kaya & Mukba, 2017). For example, life experiences such as becoming a parent, getting older, and exposure to infectious diseases lead to changes in people's life goals (Baker et al., 2021; De Jong et al., 2020; Wehner et al., 2021).

To achieve these goals, motivation and goal attainability are as important as the factors affecting life goals. People who believe that their goals are important and are motivated to achieve these goals perceive their goals as more attainable. Contrary to this, when a goal is perceived as less attainable and there is less motivation, the importance of that goal decreases. Another perspective is that if importance is given to goals that cannot be attained or prevented to be attained for some reason, people can have lower level of well-being and a higher level of anxiousness. Therefore, perceived loss of control on important goals and unattainability damage well-being and pose a risk factor for mental problems such as depression (Bühler et al., 2019).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals

Goals we have set and pursuit throughout our lives have a significant effect on our mental health; however, the life goals that are chosen are also important. When reviewing the literature, Self-determination Theory of Kasser and Ryan stands out. According to this theory, life goals are classified into two categories: intrinsic life goals and extrinsic life goals (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Intrinsic goals include close relationships, contribution to society, physical health, personal development, and contribution to the family. Extrinsic goals include financial success, personal image/attractiveness, and social fame/popularity (Kasser & Ryan, 2001).

When we look at the above, we can see that extrinsic and intrinsic goals are different and therefore they do not have the same effect on people's lives (Koçak & Ak, 2015). Intrinsic goals (e.g., personal development and relationships) have a positive correlation with well-being, life satisfaction, enjoying life more, happiness, and self-confidence and a negative correlation with mental problems such as depression and anxiety. This is the opposite of extrinsic goals (such as wealth, fame, and physical appearance). Less satisfaction in life leads to less happiness, lower level of self-confidence, and a negative state of mind. Although extrinsic goals have less love compared to intrinsic goals, they contain contradictory and competitive relationships (Brdar et al., 2009; Janke & Dickhäuser, 2019; McClure & Lydon, 2018). For example, having an extrinsic goal such as financial success can result in mental problems such as depression and anxiety when trying to attain this goal. However, this is not true for intrinsic goals (Ling et al., 2016). There is an important relationship between extrinsic goals and likelihood of risky behavior. Extrinsic goals have a positive relationship with risk-taking in several areas including health/safety, ethics, entertainment, and finance (Djeriouat, 2017). A study in the literature found that there are differences between generations regarding intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation. Intrinsic goal orientation of the generation baby boomers is found to be more than the intrinsic goal orientation of the generations X and Y (millennials). One of the reasons why the generations X and Y prioritize extrinsic goals is the increasing economic challenges in recent years as well as prioritization of financial success which is an extrinsic life goal. For example, today, university students have a tendency to have extrinsic goals such as financial gain rather than intrinsic goals such as personal development and contribution to society when deciding on a university major. Another reason is the negative effects of technology and the Internet on these generations (Twenge et al., 2012).

People with extrinsic goals are more inclined to have smartphone addiction and watch more television than people with intrinsic goals. This also applies to the frequency of substance abuse (İlhan & Özbay, 2010; Yatmaz et al., 2021). Attaining intrinsic goals have effects on people such as increased well-being whereas extrinsic goals such as being famous, personal image, and financial success do not cause these effects (Van Hiel & Vansteenkiste, 2009). Compared to an extrinsic goal, having an intrinsic goal is more related to

physical and psychological well-being. Intrinsic goals are satisfactory on their own and meet psychological needs such as autonomy and encourage people to have healthy behavior (Behzadnia, 2020; Vallerand, 2000). While intrinsic life goals affect academic success positively, extrinsic life goals affect academic success negatively by making students focus on extrinsic goals instead of learning activities (Ling et al., 2016). Extrinsic goals are related to the desire to own. People with more extrinsic goals need other people's approval; therefore, they try to make a good impression on other people. This type of goal is not satisfactory because it does not give enough importance to personal development. Extrinsic goals tend to cause more superficial and short-term positive effects. Extrinsic goals are seen more in environments where there is more pressure, control, and competition and thus stress (Guillen-Royo & Kasser, 2015; Jang, 2017; Rijavec et al., 2011). At the same time, extrinsic goals have a negative relationship with self-respect, and intrinsic goals have a positive and supportive relationship with self-respect (Lee et al., 2019). People who prioritize extrinsic goals care less about values such as commitment and altruism. Rigidness, cruelty, and mental fixations prevail. People who tend to have more extrinsic goals have less empathy. This is the opposite in people with more intrinsic goals: they care about developing positive relationships and helping people in need. They are open to new ideas (Duriez, 2011).

It is emphasized that life goals are not just important for the well-being of people but also for the well-being of generations. A study found that people with intrinsic life goals show more environmental friendly behavior such as environmental protection than interest in personal wealth (Unanue et al., 2016).

As seen above, intrinsic life goals are quite important for psychosocial health. Therefore, factors that encourage and support people to have intrinsic life goals should be identified and developed. Adolescence is an important life stage for shaping of goals with the formation of abstract thinking skills, and parents' attitudes in this stage have a critical role in developing life goals. In children who are raised by parents with autonomous and supportive parent attitudes, intrinsic goal orientation increases significantly more than extrinsic goal orientation (Roman et al., 2015).

Some actions can include both intrinsic and extrinsic life goals. For example, regular exercise becomes an intrinsic goal when it is done to achieve physical health, and regular exercise can also be an extrinsic goal when it is done to achieve a more attractive body (Lee & Pounders, 2019). Another example can be the actions at work; while working for a financial gain is an extrinsic goal, it can also be an intrinsic goal because the work done contributes to the society and results in personal development (Bühler et al., 2019). Other studies report that having extrinsic goals is neither positive nor negative on its own; however, extreme commitment to extrinsic goals makes the person move away from intrinsic goals such as contribution to family, personal development, and meaningful life (Aslan, 2014). Considering

the economic and cultural conditions of people, extrinsic goals are not necessarily harmful. Especially in developing countries, extrinsic goals (financial success) can help them for their psychological well-being (Ingrid et al., 2009; Roman et al., 2015).

Diseases and Life Goals

Another factor that motivates us to have intrinsic goals is the social support system. The stronger a person's social support system, the stronger the feeling of gratitude is. For example, patients who experience long-term effects of their diseases, cancer survivors, and people with disabilities receive emotional support from their families and society members. These people are more close to their intrinsic life goals because they are completely connected to life and have difficult experiences in life. When they share their difficult experiences with family members, relatives, or close friends, their feelings of gratitude can cause them to focus more on their intrinsic goals than extrinsic life goals (Chun & Lee, 2013; Lee et al., 2019).

Being stigmatized due to some diseases is a factor that prevents people from attaining their life goals. Intrinsic and extrinsic life goals have different effects on stigmatized people. People who are stigmatized for mental illnesses and infectious diseases and prioritize intrinsic goals over extrinsic goals are more inclined to seek psychological help. At the same time, these people are less inclined to self-stigmatization. People who prioritize extrinsic life goals also value social status and reputation; therefore, they refrain from seeking help because they think that stigmatization can damage their reputation (Algarin et al., 2021; Lannin et al., 2020).

A challenging and unattainable goal can cause mental problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Replacing unattainable goals with more attainable goals can have a positive effect on the healing or well-being of people suffering from a wide range of health problems including infertility, amputation, and cancer (Andrade et al., 2021; Scobbie et al., 2021). For example, it is not realistic to expect a happy life without any suffering. Everyone suffers from time to time in their life. It can be possible to reduce suffering in one's life but it is not possible to completely eliminate it. If someone has a life goal of eliminating suffering, it can be necessary to let that person understand and learn how to live with and cope with inevitable suffering using therapeutic communication and therapies (Mackrill, 2011).

Life goals are believed to have a positive effect on patients' participation and adherence in treatment programs. Rehabilitation programs that focus on life goals are recommended (Nair, 2003). Nurses who have one-to-one and frequent contact with people are needed in this area. Nurses are healthcare professionals, and they should not see patients only as diseases rather treat each patient individually and provide a holistic treatment program; therefore, nurses should also include life goals in the treatment process. Nurses and other healthcare professionals should

encourage people to talk about their personal goals and focus on how they can integrate these goals into patients' care planning (Cripe et al., 2021). Strategies should be developed to teach patients how to deal with goals that become unattainable because of illness and to encourage patients to set goals such as maximizing health which is more likely to be successful and these strategies should be used in rehabilitation processes (Andrade et al., 2021). Additionally, psychiatric nurses and other healthcare professionals working in mental health should provide positive psychotherapy and awareness-based therapies to patients who are exposed to stigmatization or whose vital functions are severely affected to allow them to set life goals and follow these goals. Furthermore, nurses should encourage cancer survivor adolescents and young adults to think about areas of life where they can set goals such as career, family, and hobbies and encourage them to have hope and goal-oriented behavior (Berg & Mascaró, 2020).

Having goals in one's life is considered to be a factor that makes life meaningful. Furthermore, intrinsic life goals provide benefits that help to protect, improve, and treat mental health; therefore, it is extremely important to encourage people to have intrinsic goals. As a therapeutic factor, encouraging patients to have intrinsic goals and including life goals in their treatment plans can be recommended for the treatment of psychiatric disorders. Healthcare professionals who play an important role in developing hope in patients, helping them set life goals, and finding meaning in life should be encouraged to research and receive training on life goals. Considering the fact the extrinsic life goals do not always result in bad outcomes, experimental studies which focus on both types of goals in a balanced way should be conducted.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Concept – G.Y.; Design – G.Y.; Supervision – G.R.; Materials – G.Y., G.R.; Data Collection and/or Processing – G.Y., G.R.; Analysis and/or Interpretation – G.Y., G.R.; Literature Review – G.Y.; Writing – G.Y.; Critical Review – G.R.

Declaration of Interests: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Funding: This study received no funding.

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