

Commentary: Existential Positive Psychology Perspectives on Interventions by Paul T.P. Wong

Don Laird, NCC, LPC, DCC¹

¹Carlow University

Expanding, but not abandoning their philosophical roots, existential-humanistic practitioners and academics have a long-standing tradition of inviting all disciplines of study to the table. The hope was, and is, to encourage an inclusive and fruitful discussion regarding our unique human condition. Now the study of science finds itself in a curious position regarding some radical shifts in its soft-science cousin psychology.

Prior to 2020, the conventional wisdom in mainstream psychology was mostly one of indifference toward all things meaning-based or spiritual-centered. As Dr. Paul T.P. Wong (2023) points out:

Some may dismiss the concept of SEW (spiritual-existential wellbeing) as unrealistic armchair philosophy but, during the pandemic, most of my clients wrestled with existential issues and wondered whether it is even possible to find some happiness in a harsh and dangerous world (Wong, 2022).

Dr. Wong's observations do not stand alone and, in fact, continue to expose the necessity for further studies on the application of meaning and suffering in psychology and therapy. His lifetime of research into positive existential psychology, meaning, flourishing, and suffering clearly supports this need. Not surprisingly, mainstream psychology must now heed his work. Why? For starters, a global pandemic, ongoing racial injustice, polarization within communities and families, and unprecedented political turmoil. The efficacy of traditional skill-set approaches like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and their reliance on challenging and reframing negative thinking are not equipped to meet help-seekers' search for meaning and purpose in a world that is falling apart around them. To suggest otherwise is clinical gaslighting.

Moreover, studies now suggest that some positive psychology interventions lessen somatic and emotional issues that can negatively affect health. Subsequently, further logical steps should allow for the integration and acceptance of psychospiritual and spiritual meaning approaches into therapy. An exceptional position is at hand to measure the eventual success of existential-positive applications and their potential psychological effects. This is a space worth addressing for fair-minded practitioners and researchers alike.

As the World Health Organization has emphasized, freedom from disease and longevity do not exclusively define health. Quality of life matters—meaning in life matters. It is clear from Dr. Wong's research that having a sense of life purpose, understanding a balance between suffering and meaning, and living a more physically and mentally integrated life is linked to one's ability to flourish across a lifespan. Thus, helping cultivate and integrate existential-positive psychology and existential-spiritual wellbeing has great potential for leading help-seekers to more meaningful and healthier lives.

References

- Wong, P. T. P. (2023). Spiritual-existential wellbeing (SEW): The faith-hope-love model of mental health and total wellbeing [Editorial]. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, 12.