

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## The role of life purpose in the therapeutic relationship

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International Journal of Life Science Research Archive, 2024, 06(01), 028–040

Publication history: Received on 28 November 2023; revised on 06 January 2024; accepted on 08 January 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53771/ijlsra.2024.6.1.0110>

### Abstract

**Objective:** Positive psychological interventions have proven to help clients make life plans that give them a sense of fulfillment and importance. Such interventions help clients with goals, essential life factors, their sense of purpose or belonging, and their belief that life is worth living. Specifically, this research explored how mental health professionals addressing the topic of life purpose with those seeking treatment may affect a therapeutic relationship.

**Methods:** Six individual interviews were conducted with mental health clinicians to investigate patterns involving a clients' life purpose and therapy. Clinicians discussed in the interviews how a client's life purpose, transcendence of a higher power, external factors and interpretation of their sense of happiness affect the therapeutic relationship and mental health outcomes.

**Results:** The study found that when the therapist consistently examined those topics with the client, it affected the therapeutic relationship by focusing the treatment plan, creating a smoother therapy process, providing motivation for therapy, and more effective treatment.

**Conclusion:** The focused approach on the importance of a client's life purpose in the scope of the therapeutic relationship, provided psychological fulfillment to the client and gave the therapist a better understanding of the client.

**Keywords:** Life Purpose; Meaning; Therapeutic Relationship; Outcome; Positive Psychology

### 1 Introduction

Competent mental health treatment is crucial to improve healthcare systems and reduce ineffective services. A Harris Poll shows 87% of Americans believe mental illness should not be a source of guilt and 86% agree it is treatable (APA, 2019). Untreated mental illness has significant consequences for society, with young adults having the highest suicide rates (Lake, J., & Turner, M. S., 2017). Depression is the leading cause of suicide, and poverty contributes to higher rates due to lack of supportive housing, financial stress, and societal pressures (Lake, J., & Turner, M. S., 2017).

Mental health services are inadequate for treating various conditions. Clinicians are working to improve treatment and set clients up for success. Discussing life purpose with clients can impact therapeutic relationships and outcomes, impacting the client's trajectory of success. The therapeutic relationship and outcome rely heavily on the connection between therapist and client (Koole, S. L., & Tschacher, W., 2016). A meta-analysis of 190 studies found a correlation between strong therapeutic outcomes and a common language, shared experiences, and effective co-regulation of motor

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actions (Koole, S. L., & Tschacher, W., 2016). The In-Sync model, promoting interpersonal synchrony, may improve therapeutic outcomes by promoting synchronized movements between clients and therapists (Koole, S. L., & Tschacher, W., 2016). However, there exists a gap in the research regarding what role a clients' life purpose plays in this therapeutic relationship and whether it can improve therapeutic outcomes.

The therapeutic technique of searching for the client's life purpose, rooted in positive psychology, encourages clients to explore positive emotions and uncover traits linked to self-actualization. This client-centered approach enables individuals to express themselves authentically, leading to improved lives and a sense of purpose. This motivates clients to pursue ongoing mental health treatment. Positive psychology interventions leverage clients' strengths to address their issues effectively (Harvard, 2008). An individual's life purpose plays a crucial role in their mental health treatment and therapy success. Understanding the client's motivation for seeking treatment is important in establishing a therapeutic relationship. According to a Pew Research Center study, factors such as faith, family, pets, travel, and nature were consistently cited as contributors to individuals' sense of purpose. Among these factors, family was mentioned by 69% of American adults as the most important source of meaning in their lives, followed by a person's career at 34%. Spending time with family emerged as the most important aspect, while religion was identified as the second most important factor (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Finding a sense of purpose means different things to different people. For example, lower-income Americans are 14% less likely to find a sense of meaning in friendship, while upper-class White adults are 23% more likely to find a sense of meaning in friendship compared to African Americans and Hispanic Americans (Pew Research Center, 2018). White (50%) and Hispanic (52%) adults are more likely to find meaning in outdoor activities than are African American adults (32%). Those with a college degree are 31% more likely to find a sense of meaning through hobbies than high school educated individuals (9%; Pew Research Center, 2018). Higher-income individuals (14%) are more likely to find meaning in travel than lower-income adults (3%). Younger adults, regardless of education, find a sense of meaning in learning. Married adults tend to vest their sense of meaning in their partner or family. Conservative American adults are 30% more likely to find meaning in religion. However, atheists are more likely to find meaning in creative hobbies (11%), travel (13%), and leisure activities (14%). These factors support the idea that different individuals find meaning in different things and that client's life purpose may be an important therapeutic intervention. These factors highlight the individual nature of finding meaning and emphasize the significance of a client's life purpose in therapy. When therapists adopt a client-centered approach, they must thoroughly understand the client to help them clarify their life purpose.

Patients consistently express satisfaction with continuous treatment and well-managed support. This ongoing support, including long-term care, aids clients in finding purpose and advancing their mental health plans. Understanding clients' sense of purpose is crucial for guiding them towards their goals. Dissatisfaction arises when individuals with serious conditions have unmet needs, highlighting the urgency of delivering effective mental health treatment. Psychotherapy plays a vital role, and research suggests that the client's life purpose is often undervalued in the therapeutic relationship. The positive psychology research focused on the relationship of a client's values and therapeutic goals would need ongoing research, and the importance of effective mental health treatment is vital for more holistic healthcare systems (Schueller, S. M., & Parks, A. C., 2014). The client's sense of purpose, rooted in positive psychology, varies across populations and therapeutic approaches, but the underlying concept remains the same. This research explores if and how the client's sense of life purpose is useful in proving successful mental health treatment and the influences on therapeutic relationships.

### **1.1 Overview of Life Purpose in Therapy**

The source of a person's sense of purpose varies from individual to individual; however, upon deeper investigation, a central theme emerges. Studies have shown that a purpose-filled lifestyle can lead to better physical health while also supporting mental health treatment (Hill, Patrick L, Edmonds, Grant W, & Hampson, Sarah E., 2017). For example, in Hawaii, a study of participants' health and personality uncovered that a sense of purpose helped improve sleep, physical activities, and overall mental health (Hill, Patrick L, Edmonds, Grant W, & Hampson, Sarah E., 2017). One could thus argue that facilitating discussions about a client's sense of purpose would motivate a client to seek further treatment. This would also allow clients to invest in themselves and work on the client-therapist relationship. Further evidence supports the claim that clients who view life as meaningful have a greater chance of having a positive outlook on life (Hill, P. L., Burrow, A. L., Sumner, R., & Young, R. K., 2015). Understanding a client's sense of purpose is crucial for developing a highly beneficial mental health treatment that improves their overall outcomes. Emphasizing positive psychology interventions, including the client's sense of purpose, can result in positive treatment plans and outcomes. The benefit of positive psychology can help the therapist identify the values, and principles that often become forgotten or not addressed in the therapeutic relationship between the client and therapist.

## 1.2 Evidence of the Importance of Purpose and Meaning

Understanding why a sense of purpose is important for clients in the long term is essential, as highlighted in existing literature. One approach, known as "life crafting," enables clients to explore and comprehend the significance of their values, passions, and goals. Another approach, called the goal attainment plan, emphasizes the importance of planning for valued outcomes prior to treatment. Research shows that positive psychological interventions can assist in developing a life plan aligned with clients' priorities, motivating them to seek treatment to fulfill their needs. When therapists better understand their clients, it enhances the therapeutic relationship and increases the likelihood of successful outcomes (Schippers, Michaéla, & Ziegler, N., 2019). When exploring a client's purpose, certain aspects are important for both the client and therapist to help the client move closer to their sense of purpose. Setting personal goals is often integral to therapeutic relationships, enabling clients to gain self-awareness, understand others, and discover their purpose. Research by Locke and Latham emphasizes the effectiveness of goal planning in mental health treatment (Riopel, L., MSc., 2020). Clear goal setting enhances clients' focus, while encountering challenges provides opportunities for growth (Riopel, L., MSc., 2020). Commitment to change and working towards goals with accountability are essential, and feedback from the therapist guides clients in planning and adjusting expectations (Riopel, L., MSc., 2020).

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## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Design

The research explores how the client's purpose influences therapeutic relationships and outcomes. The study used a snowball sampling method, inviting interviewees through flyers sent via email to mental health clinic directors, supervisors, and department heads in Los Angeles County. The flyers invited qualified mental health practitioners to volunteer for the research, aiming for diverse participation in terms of educational background, gender, sexual orientation, specialties, etc. They were distributed to various mental health organizations, including National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), to ensure a wide range of experiences. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted remotely and recorded with participants' consent. The study was approved by the human subject board at the California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

### 2.2 Participants and Procedures

The study included six participants, who were required to be mental health professionals with at least one year of therapeutic clinical experience. The sample included four female and two male therapists, with levels of experience ranging from 2 to 41 years. The six participants had worked with groups such as homeless individuals, families, hospital patients, and clients from private practice, group therapy, and specific ethnic groups, minorities, and communities. All participants have worked at mental health organizations in Los Angeles County, and all have worked with young, middle-aged, and older adults. The participants were a purposive sample of clinical therapists with clinical credentials including four licensed clinical social workers, one associate clinical social worker, and one marriage family therapist. The sample included representatives of several different mental health clinics throughout Los Angeles County that served various communities and clients, including the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and the Child Family Guidance Center. The six participants signed consent forms, completed pre-interview surveys, and received secure, password-protected links for their respective online Zoom interviews. They had the opportunity to review interview questions a week in advance and the option to leave the interview at any time. Participants received a \$25 gift card. Five interviews were recorded with participant consent for accurate record-keeping. Recordings were stored securely on a password-protected research laptop, which was further protected with second password encryption. Audio and video files were stored in password-protected folders to maintain confidentiality. Recorded interviews and notes were carefully reviewed to extract detailed answers related to the research. This process focused all supporting claims of the interview answers into data that link the correlation of the client's life purpose and the therapeutic relationship.

### 2.3 Measures

The study used a triangulation methodology of the qualitative pre-interview survey and individual online interviews. It employed interviews, empirical observations, transcripts of interviews, concept mapping, and hierarchical coding frame. The research used a grounded theory approach to thematic analysis, which included further interpretation by the researcher. Thematic analysis was required to identify and describe both implicit and explicit themes within the data. The researcher then coded these data sets to create a concept map and a codebook that represented the identified themes and linked raw data for the purpose of conducting a word-based data analysis. Memos were used to track assigned codes to each theme and included code, theoretical, and operational notes. The grounded theory was analyzed

in inductive and iterative styles to help identify concepts within the interview transcripts using the constant comparative method (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). The study utilized a structured survey with both set questions and open-ended questions, administered online through SurveyHero website. Questions 1–4 focused on participants' background, experience, including years of experience, current clinical credentials, population served, and career successes. Questions 5–10 explored participants' perspectives on the topic of life purpose, covering aspects such as personal sense of purpose, frequency of the topic in therapy, importance of community, utilizing the topic for client understanding, and focused on individuals seeking mental health services. The online interviews explored how clients' life purpose influenced their therapeutic relationship and therapy outcomes. These one-to-one interviews were semi-structured, consisting of open-ended and survey questions, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview focused on two points of discussion. The first point explored the connections between the client's sense of purpose and the therapeutic relationship. The participants were asked about important topics that a therapist would need to investigate to "fully" understand the client. The researcher also discussed the importance of knowing the client's community and how this can allow the therapist to better understand the client. The final two questions for this discussion investigated how the client's life purpose and transcendence would affect the therapeutic relationship. The second point of discussion focused on the clients' therapeutic outcomes, assessing how their sense of purpose influenced the therapist's treatment planning and whether improvement of the clients was observed.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data by identifying, comparing, and contrasting themes, as well as identifying structures among them and comparing theoretical models. Memos and concept mapping were utilized to identify themes for each question, and specific codes were assigned to represent each participant's responses. This enabled statistical analysis of frequency and proportions to determine participants' agreement or disagreement on each question. Through these methods, pre-survey and interview question responses were used to develop data sets that were measurable.

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## 3 Results

### 3.1 Understanding the Client

The first topic discussed ways to understand the client better. It involved a ranking question and an open-ended interview question. Participants ranked seven categories for deciding on a treatment plan for the client: hobbies, spirituality, goals, dreams, personal interests, and relationships with family, friends and communities. This data created a linear numeric scale of what psychosocial factors participants found important. Each category could get up to seven points from each participant and get a maximum score of forty-two. Figure 1 shows the scores: relationship with family, friends, and community (39), goals (31), dreams (31), personal interests (23), spirituality (23), knowing the client (11), and hobbies (10).

In response to the open-ended question about what would help them better understand a client, Participant A suggested developing conversations about family housing situations to better connect with clients, build rapport, and understand their living arrangements. Participant B emphasized the importance of listening to the client's reasons for seeking help to understand their priorities. Participant C found questions like "What do you want from me?" and "Why are you here?" useful, highlighting the significance of knowing the client's connections, values, and relationships and recommended consistently exploring the client's identity along the therapeutic relationship. The participants cited a variety of reasons for why asking about the client's sense of belonging within their community may help therapists understand them. Most of the participants agreed that information about the client's family, community, relationships, and role in the community can reveal areas where they lack support.

### 3.2 Sense of purpose

Two questions inquired about the impact of a client's life purpose and transcendence of a higher power on the therapeutic relationship (see Table 1). Around half of the responses indicated that a client's life purpose could enhance client-focused treatment planning. Participants expressed that identifying a client's life purpose allows the therapist and client to have clear goals and streamlines treatment planning. Participant A mentioned the importance of clients having identifiable goals and knowing what they need assistance with. Participant B highlighted that a clear understanding of the client's purpose makes goal setting and treatment planning easier. The discussion also revealed that a client's sense of purpose helps therapists propose a treatment that exposes mental health barriers. For example, Participant F stated, "Finding out what barriers the client may have that would prevent them from achieving that purpose or what they see as their goal. There's a difference between the goal and your life purpose." If the client has a clear idea of which direction they would like to go, this can improve the effectiveness of the therapeutic relationship. The same participant continued by describing the sorts of questions they would ask a client to help them discover this

direction: “All right, what would you like to do after that? And then what would you like to do after that? We keep asking and then lead them so that they can see this linear transition from this little thing to something bigger. The first question any therapist should ever have been to start where the client is.”

The concept of life purpose serves as a motivating factor for both clients and therapists. Approximately 30% of responses highlighted that a client's sense of purpose enhances their motivation to collaborate with the therapist and continue treatment. Participant D emphasized that having a personal purpose adds value and direction to therapy, strengthening the therapeutic relationship. Another participant with similar opinions mentioned, “There is definitely motivation for the clinician and client to get to that endpoint and whatever purpose is for the client.”

When both parties in therapy are motivated, the sessions become simpler and more effective. Approximately 15% of participants believed that a client's life purpose leads to smoother therapy sessions and a stronger therapeutic alliance. Understanding the client's life purpose enables therapists to establish a quicker connection and accelerate progress towards the client's mental health goals. Participant F stated, “People can figure it out quicker, I want to do this, I want to do that. So, to talk about a life purpose in therapy is almost like analysis, but to talk about what your goals are, you must string stuff down. It makes it reasonable so that people can see it right away.” Participant E stated, “I think it would make [the relationship] stronger, and I guess a person who knows their life purpose has probably been more emotionally well too. So, I think it probably strengthens it a lot... If you know what you want, then you might be less suicidal, and you can figure out why you want to live.”

The timing of discussing a client's life purpose in therapy remains inconclusive. Participant F stated that a client's life purpose is too overwhelming to discuss for the client and acknowledged that it may not have a specific designated moment but rather emerges gradually through the pursuit of smaller goals. As progress is made, clients can establish larger goals that eventually lead to the exploration of their life purpose.

### **3.3 Transcendence of a higher power**

The second portion of the discussion involved transcendence and the therapeutic relationship. Participants explored how clients' belief in something greater than themselves, whether religious, spiritual, or related to scientific evolution, can influence therapy. The topic of a higher power or something beyond the client's individuality may arise during sessions. While clients often initiate this topic, therapists may inquire about religious affiliation as part of a comprehensive assessment. Participants agreed to let clients decide when they feel comfortable bringing up the topic of transcendence. Approximately 40% of responses highlighted the potential value of transcendence of a higher power as a problem-solving tool. Clients' belief in something greater than themselves can offer new solutions and aid in understanding therapy. Participant E mentioned utilizing religious beliefs as a coping mechanism when addressing stress. Participant C stated, “It can be to your advantage; if they bring it up, why not use it?”; Participant D noted, “Use anything you [can], especially if it's important for the client.” Participant B responded by saying that “This might be a piece to the puzzle.” At nearly 17% of participants agreed that a client's belief in something greater fosters a stronger therapeutic relationship and enhances their personal development. A stronger therapeutic bond promotes trust in the process, encouraging the client to engage more in self-discovery. Participant B stated, “[This] creates new pathways for the client, and something more transformative might come”. Participant F echoed similar sentiments stating, “This tells us how to approach the client and so topics might be around the issues of their belief system, you can tap into that and use that in the therapeutic process.”

Surprisingly, participants also highlighted potential drawbacks in discussing the client's beliefs. Around 28% of responses expressed concerns that it could hinder the therapeutic relationship. As Participant C explained, “This can be helpful but also harmful for the client because it can hurt the relationship if the client is blinded by faulty thinking not supporting their therapeutic relationship.” Participant F agreed, stating that this could take control of the therapeutic relationship: “I think it can be negative for the client if the client believes that God will intervene and God will take care of everything and not to worry about it.” Participant D added that certain religious beliefs may create discomfort for the therapist and pose a disadvantage to the therapeutic relationship.

### **3.4 Effects of the Therapeutic Relationship and a Client's Sense of Purpose**

The second portion of the interview explored the client's life purpose and its impact on the therapeutic outcome. Nearly half of the participants agreed that a strong therapeutic relationship and a clear sense of purpose can enhance treatment effectiveness through improved collaboration and client empowerment. This collaborative approach facilitates a smoother therapy process and more effective treatment planning. Participant D commented that if “the focus is clear, helps guide you faster to that goal.” Participants F, C, E, and A noted that the client's life purpose improves the therapeutic outcome because both individuals are seeking successful outcomes. One participant explained how this

enhances the treatment as follows: “It’s maybe important and matters to therapy, more accessible for the therapist, everything seems like it’s in place, and helps therapy to move forward.” However, achieving better treatment planning and outcomes is not without challenges. Barriers can arise from irrational goals and the therapist’s potential interference in the treatment process. One participant emphasized that addressing other crises and barriers is necessary for the equation to work effectively. Participant F stated, “[it is] 99% helpful, because you’re both tracking on the same goal to get to that life purpose. The 1% where it’s not helpful or could be detrimental is if the person’s idea of their life purpose is unrealistic, not necessarily delusional.” The participant also provided an example: if a client in their late sixties wants to be the president of the United States while having no GED or college degree and an extensive criminal history, then that might need to reassess what they consider to be rational goals.

### 3.5 Searching for client life purpose and its effects

A hierarchical coding frame was used to assess the impact of the therapist discussing the client’s life purpose on potential positive outcomes. Three out of six participants believed it would have no effect, two participants saw potential for positive outcomes, and one participant expressed uncertainty. Analysis of the framework suggests that most participants do not believe that exploring the client’s life purpose alone is sufficient to produce positive outcomes. Participant F indicated that if the client’s life purpose cannot be identified, it could indicate a plateau in therapy progress, leading to a potential recommendation for the client to see a different therapist. This participant elaborated on this scenario using the following example: “I’m like your first therapist, or better yet your first-grade teacher, and now you’ve graduated, and so I know who your second-grade teacher should be. I want to know if you’re ready to go to second grade”. According to Participant B, the search alone would not improve the therapeutic outcome; however, they did state that this process was akin to “planting seeds. Whether that seed grows or not depends on the client.” According to Participant D, the therapist should assist the client in searching for their life purpose. However, they also clarified that the search is not enough to achieve the best possible outcomes for the client. The remaining participants C and A stated that it could lead to positive outcomes by bringing them closer to their goals and increasing the chances of success in achieving these goals.

### 3.6 Factors That May Influence Happiness

As a part of the survey, participants were asked to choose which of four factors were most important for a client’s overall happiness: material happiness (financial gains, possessions), spiritual happiness (religion, spirituality, faith), psychological fulfillment (one’s lifelong dream, becoming the person you are meant to be, fulfilling you full potential), and possible external factors. They were then asked to explain their choices. The results indicate that the factor perceived to have the greatest effect on overall happiness was psychological fulfillment. Nearly 39% of total responses (including responses from those who picked more than one choice) indicated that psychological fulfillment would have the greatest effect on the client’s sense of happiness. Five of the participants agree that internal psychological fulfillment tends to work with most people and is believed to be the most reliable to affect the sense of happiness. As Participant F stated, “If a client feels like they have accomplished what they want out of therapy, that’s their stepping-stone to the next part of their life, and so the psychological fulfillment is an internal thing. This concept is more than the person. It’s self-discovery of who they are and what they are meant to be, which then gives them satisfaction. This can add layers of success and happiness for the client.”

Material and “external” factors each represented 23% of responses. With regard to material factors, participants mentioned that these often concern whether basic needs of the client are being met. Participant A, who works with homeless and low-income populations, stated that basic needs include everything from shelter to food, water, and clothing. The lack of any of these necessities is detrimental to the client’s search for a deeper sense of purpose. The external factors accounted for another 23% of responses, participants mentioned relationships, support systems, and connections the client may have with the community.

Participants unanimously agreed that a client’s sense of happiness is strongly correlated to their life purpose. It serves as a valuable indicator of the client’s progress towards their lifelong goals. Participant C referred to client’s sense of happiness as a “window” into their sense of purpose, providing insights into what truly matters to the client. Participant E emphasized that a sense of purpose can bring happiness and offer a glimpse into the client’s objectives. However, the participant cautioned that solely achieving a goal doesn’t guarantee overall well-being.

Participants emphasized two important considerations regarding the correlation between a client’s happiness and life purpose. First, the client’s sense of happiness should originate from within themselves. Second, any barriers should be thoroughly addressed before interventions related to life purpose are introduced. Participant B noted that happiness is not typically an explicit goal in therapy sessions, while participant C emphasized the importance of client-driven discussions. The participants answers contained three persistent themes regarding the relation between a client’s life

purpose and their sense of happiness: the presence of a strong connection, its usefulness for determining client-centered goals, and its use as a window into what could be the client's true sense of happiness.

#### 4 Discussion

A sense of purpose is something that many strive to find in their life. The participants stated that basic needs such as shelter, food and addressing mental health barriers must be met before they can explore their life purpose with a therapist. This perspective is consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a motivational theory in psychology that describes five hierarchical layers of human needs: physiological (e.g., food and clothing), safety (e.g., job security), love and belonging needs (fulfilling relationships), esteem, and self-actualization. Thus, this theory also supports the notion that other external factors also play some part in the client's sense of happiness. Life circumstances can lead to long-term situations that make life more difficult, such as poverty, financial problems, chronic illness, systemic racism, and discrimination. Clients seeking therapy face a variety of stressors, such as work problems, trouble sleeping, limited recreational time, and strained personal relationships. Interventions based in positive psychology use a client's strengths to help them overcome their adverse circumstances (Harved, 2008). The final question posed to the interviewees was the relationship between a client's sense of happiness and their sense of purpose, regardless of the daily challenges they are facing.

Participants agreed that happiness and a client's purpose have a strong correlation and that the client's sense of happiness can be an accurate explanation of their lifelong goals. The therapist may also be able to help the client realize what their life purpose could be. For example, the therapist may discover patterns of interests and passions that have been second nature to the client, qualities which may not have been pursued or developed further due to the adverse circumstances the client had been subjected to. Once the client is in a stable emotional state and their basic needs have been met, the concept of life purpose can play a role in the therapeutic relationship. The therapist can build on initial, smaller goals, asking their client what they would like to do once each goal has been accomplished. Building towards ever greater goals in this way would eventually culminate in the client discovering their life purpose.

The Pew Research Center (2018) found that 69% of American adults reported that family was what gave them meaning in their lives. This was corroborated by the results of a survey, where 39% of responses indicated that the most useful topic to query a client about was their family, friends, and community. Five out of six participants reported that family was the most important factor in their own sense of purpose. Knowing a client's family structure allows therapists to better understand their background, such as their social support system, culture, religious affiliation, and extracurricular activities. This information is crucial for understanding what sort of treatment a person needs. Hill et al. (2017) found that clients with a stronger sense of purpose feel more motivated for therapy, leading to fewer missed appointments, reduced harm, and healthier habits. This also allows for more opportunities for the client to develop positive qualities, which would demonstrate the efficacy of therapeutic relationship therapy and motivate the client to continue seeking treatment.

Positive psychology interventions give clients the motivation to improve their lives, increasing the success rate of the therapy (Schipper, Michaéla, & Ziegler, 2019). According to the results of the present study, 43% of total responses agreed that a client's life purpose could influence the development of focused treatment. Nearly 29% believed the client's life purpose would motivate them to continue attending therapy. As argued by Locke and Latham's in their article "Toward a Theory of Task Motivations" (1968), goal planning and feedback are crucial for changing the trajectory of a person's life, which can include elements of a person's life purpose (Riopel, L., MSc., 2020). Locke and Latham's article outlined five factors that research asks if they had a clear life purpose and strong therapeutic relationship, and found nearly half of the responses agree that better therapeutic collaborations would be the result. This also accounts for the theme of a smoother therapy process and a strong therapeutic alliance. Locke and Latham also published an article in which they claimed that a client's goals and sense of purpose can be a major source of motivation, contributing to a simpler and smoother therapy process (Riopel, L., MSc., 2020).

The results of the present research support Locke and Latham's claims about the importance of clarity when setting small goals, which can eventually culminate in addressing the topic of the client's sense of purpose. Two possible hindrances to the client's development of a clear sense of purpose and a stronger therapeutic relationship include unrealistic goals on the part of the client and incompetence on the part of the therapist. As Schippers et. al. (2019) suggested, the inability of the client to work towards their established goals can create stress and anxiety and the client's goals and life purpose need to be realistic and come from the client rather than being suggested by the therapist. This process needs to be client-driven and conducted at the right pace. In the present study, half of the participants agreed that "the search for meaning" represents a crisis commonly found among those suffering from mental health conditions, while the other half responded that it might or that they were not sure. Further research is needed to understand how

positive psychological approaches to the client's life purpose may improve the therapeutic relationship and the results of long-term treatment.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

- Strengths

This research can provide valuable insights to mental health therapists and clinical agencies to improve their clients' outcomes. Exploring the effects of a client's life purpose can help clinicians become better aware of their performance and accountability. Social workers, therapists, and mental health clinics may benefit from better understanding of a client's sense of purpose.

Mental health clinics are at the forefront of client and therapist interactions, and their first impression can make a major difference in the therapist's relationship with a potential client. Exploring life purpose may give mental health agencies the advantage of identifying barriers quickly and adding value to the treatment. Graham and Shier (2014) explain that stakeholders' expectations of clinicians can have negative consequences for therapists' overall well-being. Unreasonable expectations can contribute to therapists' stress, and unclear work responsibilities can lower workplace satisfaction (Graham & Shier, 2014). Program directors and supervisors need to find ways to simplify the treatment process and assist the clients as efficiently as possible. Agencies should have a simplified workflow and focused treatment plans that support clients with respect to their life purpose. Social workers' expectations of their professional obligations can affect their well-being through aspects of their identity that are not conducive to the workplace. Agencies have the responsibility to set up clients and therapists for the best opportunities of success in all areas, including the client's sense of purpose. Social workers' expectations of their professional obligations can thus affect their well-being through aspects of this identity that are not conducive to the workplace (Senreich et al., 2020).

Clinical social workers are facing increased pressure due to increased demand for mental health services (Senreich et al., 2020). A more simplified treatment plan based around the discussion of a client's life purpose could lead to better outcomes for the client, positive feedback for the therapist, and more time with which they could handle the larger caseload. Senreich et al. (2020) found that feeling valued as a clinical social worker was the highest beta value in the collection of variables for the study (Senreich et al., 2020). Knowing that they have effectively treated their clients or helped them overcome barriers alleviates much of the stress felt by many social workers and through such successes, clinicians improve their clients' self-esteem, confidence in the profession, productivity, value in their work, and overall well-being (Senreich et al., 2020). As one clinician explains, "In my work, I want to be able to feel like I am doing something; that I am actually accomplishing something, and doing something that is useful and meaningful for people" (Senreich et al. 2020).

The present study's survey asked participants how many of their clients they believed were affected by their mental health treatment. One participant, who worked with the homeless population, estimated the figure as being around 30% of their client's; two participants believed about 50% had been able to offer effective treatment. Clinical mental health professionals strive to improve the quality of the mental health treatments their clients receive. Senreich et al. (2020) cite the thoughts of one interviewee: "Feeling valued and contributing to something beyond my life, something worthy and important. Just keep a sense of purpose and make a contribution to the community or to society somehow." Clinicians need feedback of their therapeutic skills, and the client's sense of purpose offers space for this concept. Mental health clinicians work closely with colleagues and collaborate with each other to improve the efficacy of their treatments, with direct implications for their overall professional well-being (Senreich et al., 2020).

- Limitations

This study sought to understand how a client's life purpose influences the therapeutic relationship and possible outcomes. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge to sampling a more comprehensive range of participants due to stay-at-home orders and non-essential travel restrictions. The interview process was conducted through the internet, but the scope and quality of the answers may have been limited by the length of the interviews. Additionally, many of the participants complained that due to the transition to online therapy sessions, they had higher caseloads, were faced with new challenges concerning client confidentiality, and had to learn new styles of working and technological competencies.

Despite extensive online outreach through social media, only six clinicians accepted the invitation. This research only involves mental health professionals in the United States and did not seek involvement in other countries or cultures. A person's idea of their life purpose may be rooted in their own cultural views; understanding a client's background can



thus enable the therapist to better assist the client in their exploration of their purpose in life. This study would be limited by cultural factors and perspectives that may be missing in this research.

It is also important to note the challenges of finding a sense of purpose and meaning as a limitation. A consistent theme with surveys regarding mental health barriers such as depression or anxiety, is the stress and anxiety associated with seeking a fulfilling life (Schippers, Michaéla, & Ziegler, N., 2019). The search for a life purpose may pressure individuals to have a clear path to fulfillment; however, such a path may not be immediately apparent and usually takes a considerable amount of time to discover. Given that, this pressure can induce anxiety and cause clients to view having a sense of purpose as a protective mechanism (Schippers, Michaéla, & Ziegler, N., 2019). These anxiety-provoking situations can lead many to different ways of coping with it, such as striving to accomplish their goals or even finding new ways to build exciting relationships (Schippers, Michaéla, & Ziegler, N., 2019). According to the World Health Organization, studies of individuals in 24 countries found that low perceived need was the most common reason for not continuing treatment (WHO, 2013). Approximately 63.8% of participants felt that mental health issues should be handled on one’s own, while young individuals and women were most likely to seek treatment (WHO, 2013). 39.3% of all participants who considered treatment ineffective would drop out, and 26.9% had negative experiences with treatment (WHO, 2013). A study by Weinberger, Mateo, and Sirey (2009) examined barriers to mental health treatment and planning goals with those suffering from depression. The survey examined 47 participants, including psychological barriers like social attitudes and stigmas, logistical barriers like transportation and availability, and illness-related barriers such as serious depression or anxiety (Weinberger, M. I., Mateo, C., & Sirey, J. A., 2009). It is critical to understand all such barriers in the course of helping a client find a sense of purpose; likewise, this understanding can help the researcher answer the question of what role the client’s purpose plays in the therapeutic relationship and outcome.

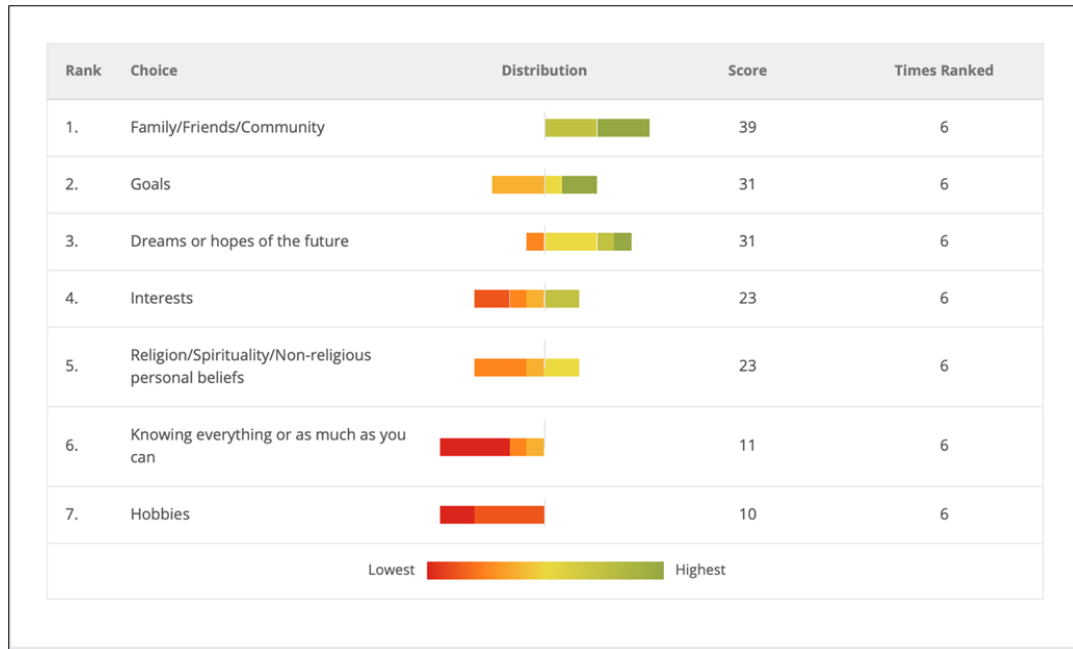
**Table 1** Interview Results

		<b>Identifiable Themes and Supporting Responses</b>	
	<i>How might the client’s life purpose affect the therapeutic relationship?</i>		
	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participant’s words)</b>	<b>Proportions for coded themes</b>
N=6	Focused Treatment Planning (F)	“Clear identifiable goals”	F=42.86%
		“Easier goal setting”	
		“Focused treatment planning”	
		“Therapy becomes more effective”	
		“Better treatment planning”	
		“Helps expose barriers”	
	Motivation for therapy (M)	“Motivation for treatment”	M=25.57%
		“Plays a major role”	
		“More value and weight to therapy”	
		“Motivation to work together for therapy”	
	Smoother therapy process (P)	“Smoother therapy process”	P=14.29%
		“Speeds up therapy”	
	Strong Therapeutic alliance (S)	“Faster connection to client”	S=14.29%
		“Makes relationship stronger”	
N=6	<i>How does transcendence affect therapeutic relationship?</i>		
	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participant’s words)</b>	<b>Proportions for coded themes</b>
	Problem-solving tool (T)	“Part of the puzzle”	T=38.89%
		“Creates new pathways”	

		"It's to your advantage"	
		"Useful tool"	
		"Useful tool"	
		"Helpful tool"	
		"Assists therapist to know how to approach client" (Participate F)	
	Ineffective or may hinder (U)	"Rarely see it/no affect"	U=27.78%
		"Can get in the way of treatment"	
		"Can hurt the relationship if the client is not comfortable"	
	Strong therapeutic alliance (S)	"More trusting in the relationship"	S=16.67%
		"Can assist in the relationship"	
		"Makes relationship stronger"	
	Personal development for client (P)	"Becomes more open-minded"	P=16.67%
		"Client transformation"	
		"Client self-discovery"	
N=6	<i>How does having a strong therapeutic relationship and a clear sense of purpose lead to better treatment planning?</i>		
	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participates words)</b>	<b>Proportions for coded themes</b>
	Motivates Therapist (M)	"Motivates therapist to work harder"	
		"Makes job easier for therapist"	
	Better collaboration (B)	"Client is more willing to work with you"	B=47.06%
		"It's important for getting treatment"	
		"Clients are more in control"	
		"Better collaboration"	
		"The focus is clear"	
		"Clear goals"	
		"Smoother process of therapy"	
		"Speeds up the process"	
	Effective treatment (E)	"Helps treatment to move forward"	E=29.41%
		"Move forward towards goals"	
		"More likely to have better treatment"	
		"Better treatment"	
		"99% helpful for treatment"	
	Hinder treatment (H)	"Clinician can negatively guide things"	H=11.76%
		"1% unhelpful for unrealistic (not delusional) goals"	
N=6	<i>Is the therapist "search" enough to gain positive outcomes?</i>		
	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participates words)</b>	
	Yes	"Can lead therapy to positive outcomes"	

		"We may not find client's purpose, but we know what it's not"	
		"Push them towards the right direction"	
	Inconclusive	"However, we narrowed it down"	
	No	"We just plant seeds, and it may grow"	
		"It's important and necessary but not enough"	
		"Transition is possibly required with a new therapist in order to gain positive outcomes"	
		"Possible indicator that therapy "feeling" stuck or unable to move any further"	
N=6	<i>In examining factors for the client's overall success or happiness, which of these have the greatest effect and why?</i>		
	<b>Labeled factors</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participant's words)</b>	
	Material Happiness	"Basic needs are critical"	
		"Individuals seeking treatment need the basics to continue treatment"	
	Spiritual happiness	"This may give client closure and meaning to their happiness"	
	Psychological fulfillment	"I believe this factor connects with most people"	
		"This is important"	
		"It's something that is an inner strength that pulls them through"	
		"Comes from their will to seek treatment or motivation"	
		"Important factor, will power"	
	External factors (Family, friends, community)	"Connection with others"	
		"Strong network of relationships"	
		"Client's community"	
N=6	<i>How do the interpretations of the client's sense of happiness play into the client's purpose/outcome?</i>		
	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Supporting responses (In participant's words)</b>	
	Strong Correlation	"Happiness is key to their life purpose"	
		"There's a connection" (Participant D)	
		"Clients are happier with life purpose"	
		"Purpose is needed to be fulfilled and thus happy"	
		"If you are searching their purpose, your tapping into their happiness"	
		"More purpose equals to more happiness and is connected to mood. It's all connected"	
		"Once barriers are addressed, client's life purpose can serve their happiness"	
		"Balancing act, need to come from client"	

	Accurate representation of client’s life purpose	“Happiness can be their “true” purpose”	
		“It’s a sneak peak of what client’s purpose can be”	
		“Open a window to a real purpose directly or indirectly”	
		“There’s a connection”	



**Figure 1** Factors to Understand Clients

## 5 Conclusion

Philosophers have been discussing the concept of meaning of life for millennia, and there is one truth that has become apparent: people want to live a life with purpose. Therapists should tailor the treatment to the client's circumstances and mental health condition, and discuss the client's life purpose as a therapeutic approach. However, its feasibility is dependent on a number of factors, such as basic needs, self-determination, external and internal barriers, and goal setting. Therapists that work in a critical mental health field need to work more effectively to offer their clients better opportunities for success, which can increase job satisfaction, lower therapist burnout, increase productivity, and most importantly, give clients the ability to take control of their lives, gain independence, and live a purpose-filled life.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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