

In a world...

...there are ways to find meaning – even in the most challenging times

The past few years have been difficult for people the world over. The pandemic, the growing spectre of climate upheaval and adjustments in the geopolitical order have brought many unwanted changes and disruptions to everyday life. These difficulties have also heralded feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, hopelessness and, for some, panic. The World Health Organisation said rates of anxiety and depression climbed by 25 per cent during the first year of the pandemic. Other studies have also found that rates of several mental health disorders appear to have increased during the pandemic. Similarly, climate anxiety is an increasingly well-recognised phenomenon.

Fundamentals for wellbeing

While some consider mental health and wellbeing to be static internal constructs, separate to the world in which people live, the reality is that mental health is heavily contingent on everyday happenings and social context. Basic things, such as family life, social support, stable housing and meaningful work, are important factors when establishing and maintaining mental health. Bigger social factors, such as political systems, climate safety, food (in)security and social welfare, also impact strongly on levels of stress and resilience and can influence the development of many forms of mental ill-health.

It's important to hold these broader systems in mind when trying to understand and improve mental health and wellbeing. But developing a way of finding personal meaning, despite the difficulties inherent in today's world, can bring support and help to maintain positivity and joy while engaging in meaningful actions.

When I think about understanding and managing circumstances that cause despair, my mind turns to the words of Viktor E Frankl. An Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, Frankl survived the concentration camps of World War Two. He lived through times of great distress, where he saw racism, hatred, war and the genocide of his people, and wrote a book about his experiences, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it, he

describes the way he maintained hope and found meaning and a sense of agency despite what he experienced. There's one quote to which I always return at times of despair: 'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.'

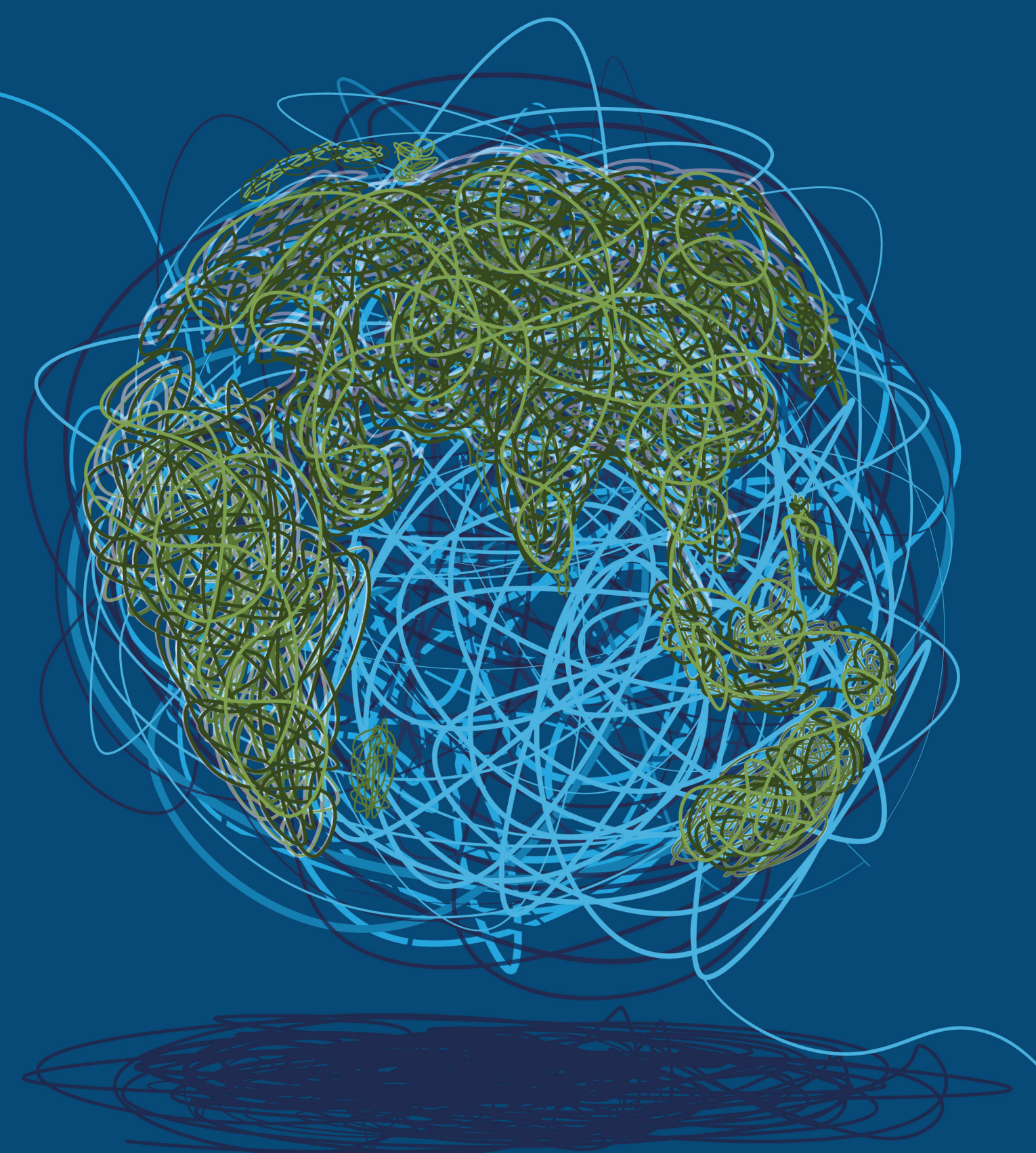
In my own life and therapy practice, I use this quote as a guide. I find it helpful to remember that everyone has a circle of control – the things you can change and those you can't. Global rates of carbon emissions or the geopolitical situation might be out of the individual's control, but there are other aspects of life that can be influenced. Importantly, these include a person's values and the way they interact with the world. But there are also decisions about politics and voting, or engagement in helpful community action.

When trying to manage significantly changing circumstances outside of your personal control, it can be helpful to notice them but to let go of a singular focus on the outcome. It can also help to pay more attention to the process of trying to make the world a better place and those things that are controllable. This method, which is often used as an anxiety management technique (a lot of anxiety stems from a focus on imagining and trying to control catastrophic outcomes), instead places the attention on the small things that can be done to effect change.

Build a framework

When thinking of finding meaning at difficult times, it's essential to have a personal framework in relation to your view of the world and the bigger questions. This would cover questions such as 'Why am I here?' and 'What is the meaning of human life' as well as 'What do I want my life to stand for?'

Meaning-making is defined as the act of understanding how people construct and understand their lives. For some who have a religious or spiritual tradition, this might be a relatively easy



ILLUSTRATIONS: IRINA PERIU



task. For those without such frameworks, it might require more excavation. This step is individual and doesn't require that you decide what the meaning of life is for everyone, just that you find a way (see panel, right) to imbue your life with a framework of meaning that can carry you through difficult times.

When understanding structures of meaning, it can be helpful to remember the key elements of a good life. In general, people who study positive psychology consider that a good life has a few key elements, including meaning, virtue (or doing good), resilience (being able to cope with hard times) and psychological wellbeing. All of these are shaped and influenced by culture and external events. Positive psychology researchers have also studied the various components of happiness. They concluded that it's made up of three key elements – pleasure, engagement and meaning. However, while feeling pleasure and engaging in enjoyable activities are essential for mental wellbeing and feeling positive, another route involves finding meaning by using our strengths to discover belonging and to contribute to issues that are bigger than the self, such as the pursuit of knowledge, family, politics, social justice or creativity.

Foundation for life

Having a good framework of meaning will support you during harder times in a range of ways. People who find life meaningful and hold a range of beliefs, including an acceptance of some suffering, are often able to find equanimity, hope, resilience and peace in the most challenging of times. In addition, having a sense of meaning can guide actions, so a person need not feel helpless. For instance, those who value kindness and belonging are likely to make efforts to connect with and support their local community which, in turn, will improve their capacity

to access social connection, build their sense of self-efficacy, and give strength to their feeling that they're contributing to the difficulties in the world in a meaningful way.

Sense of progress

Developing frameworks of meaning centred around the value of hope can be essential. There are undoubtedly distressing and difficult global events, but changes are also afoot to make progress toward making the world a fairer and more equitable place. Many countries have outlined commitments to halting climate change, there have been significant strides in healthcare and scientific knowledge bases, and more people are aware of the concepts of equity, fairness and justice.

When faced with difficulties, it can be easy to focus on what is out of your personal control and start to feel hopeless. But it's helpful to remember the ways in which humankind has changed the world for the better throughout history – and to focus on all the people who continue to work towards justice, safety and healing for all.

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If you've been affected by the issues raised here, support is available at Samaritans.org, centreformentalhealth.org.uk and mind.org.uk.

FIND YOUR WHY

It can be difficult to know how to start to find a framework of meaning. Ultimately, your meaning for your life will be individual and unique, based on your early experiences and the values you hold. If you haven't previously identified some of your key values (usually a number between three and five), it might be helpful to do so now to guide your meaning-making framework. It can be useful to explore your responses to some of these questions in a creative format, such as writing, art, sculpture or audio recording:

- Think about a time when you felt personally fulfilled and had a sense of contributing to the greater good of the world – what was happening then? What were you doing? Who were you with? Which values were you living out?
- What is your stance on suffering? Why do you think people experience suffering? Have you ever found meaning in suffering?
- What is the big picture for you? Do you have a stance on why we are here, in this life, on Earth? If not, consider what your ideal why would be – why are humans placed here? What would you like your life to stand for in this ideal scenario?
- How do you give to other people and the world?
- How do you receive nourishment and sustenance from others and the world?