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## Finding Personal Meaning

As you read through the prompts and guiding questions below, we encourage you to put pen to paper and brainstorm your answers in writing. Reflecting on your responses in this concrete way will help you clarify what matters to you most and how you can take those ideas and put them into action.

### Step 1: What matters to me?

Do you ever find yourself doing everything “right” to take care of your mental health, only to wake up lost and exhausted again the next day? Do you ever stop and wonder why you engage in the ritual of setting a New Year’s Resolution (or 20)? If you make resolutions each year only to find yourself dismayed and frustrated by your lack of progress weeks or months down the line (right around March, anyone?), it may be time to reconsider why you set resolutions or goals.

Perhaps the cultural script is at odds with your identity and motives. Or maybe the goals you are setting have more to do with societal expectations than meaningful personal reasons.

Look back on your life – particularly over the past year of the pandemic. Take an inventory in three areas and think about what matters most to you:

- 1) Values (your closely held beliefs; your moral compass)
- 2) Attitudes (likes and dislikes)
- 3) Past experiences

Notice what comes up when you reflect on these areas, and use the space below to brainstorm what matters most to you:

Takeaway tip: Go all the way back with this exploration! You may discover aspects of your life (e.g., hobbies, interests) from childhood or adolescence have especially deep meaning.

1. What matters to me? \_\_\_\_\_

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Step 2: What can I do about it?

For most of us, the answers in Step 1 may have uncovered parts of life or experiences that are no longer available to us in the current world – and have not been for close to a year. If your most meaningful life moments have been in large groups of people at a rock concert or your strongest personal values informed how you interacted with strangers on your morning commute – it makes sense to feel disconnected or demoralized a year into living in this pandemic.

The good news is that our personal sources of meaning are constantly changing. As life evolves and transforms, our search must continue. The power of creativity and flexibility in allowing us to stay consistently connected to our unique senses of meaning in life amid perpetual change and inevitable suffering cannot be underestimated.

We do not have to start from scratch or reinvent the wheel, either! For example, when working toward enhancing one’s sense of meaning in psychotherapy, it becomes critical to seek out a experiences and challenges “larger” than the self. Community engagement (think: volunteering, phone banking, donating time or money) is an incredibly effective way to bolster a sense of greater purpose.

If we can understand the “why” that drives us (see Step 1!), it gives us a chance to creatively move our actions (re: behaviors) in that direction - even if it looks totally different than we anticipated.

Takeaway tip(s): If there is something you would like to accomplish by this time next year that aligns with your discoveries from this exercise, start planning small, concrete steps now to set yourself up to achieve this long-term goal.

If there are creative pursuits you have not sought out in the past because of fear, or lack of time or opportunity, consider how you might break through these barriers to recreate those experiences in your current life.

**2. What can I do about it?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Right now?**

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**In the future?**

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