

**EXAMINING AND EXPLORING
THE SHIFTING NATURE OF
OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND
WELL-BEING**

RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND WELL-BEING

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RESEARCH IN OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND
WELL-BEING VOLUME 19

EXAMINING AND EXPLORING THE SHIFTING NATURE OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND WELL-BEING

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Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-423-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-422-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-424-4 (Epub)

ISSN: 1479-3555 (Series)



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standard
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

Volume 19 of *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being* is focused on the issue of time and changes in stress and well-being at work. Although almost all organizational scholars who are engaged in the study of occupation health and well-being will acknowledge that the psychological experience of stress and feelings of well-being are dynamic and constantly changing, all too often our models rely on studies that fail to account for this. Rather, there is a tendency to rely on relatively simple models where a set of predictors (usually personality or contextual factors) lead to increases or decreases in stress and/or well-being. In this issue, we wanted to break with that tradition and really demonstrate the many different ways that time and change could be conceptualized and measured and how this could enrich our understanding of stress and well-being in the workplace.

Given the complexity of this topic, it is no surprise that each of the nine chapters in this volume had unique perspectives and insights into the issue of how to meaningfully integrate time and change in the occupational stress and well-being literature. Broadly, the first three chapters focused on the consequences of stressful events in the workplace for personal development. The fourth and fifth chapters took a much longer timeframe to look at occupational stress and well-being over the life course. Finally, each of the final four chapters reviews and illustrates different advances and novel approaches for conceptualizing, assessing, and analyzing occupational stress and well-being.

Our lead chapter by Patrick L. Hill, Rachel D. Best, and M. Teresa Cardador examines how job stress and how a sense of purpose, quite often used as a predictor of how resilient individuals are in the face of stressful events, can be developed as individuals appraise and cope with the hardships and stressors they face. The model developed in this chapter shows how the stress and feedback relationship does not necessarily have to be negative, but rather can be associated with positive outcomes as well. In a similar vein, the second chapter by Clodagh Butler, Deirdre O'Shea, and Donald M. Truxillo centers on resilience and present a dual-pathway model showing how adaptive and proactive coping processes can facilitate not just recovery from stressor events, but positive developments in resilience levels over time. They then lay out possible paths for developmental interventions that could be used by organizations to promote resilience. In the third chapter, drawing on both personal experience and military research, Paul B. Lester provides insights into crucible experiences, highly stressful events that do not simply change levels of stress, well-being, and associated factors, but which fundamentally change the nature of the person experiencing them. Lester examines the potential positive and negative consequences of exposing individuals to such experiences, evaluates the moral implications of developmental interventions based on crucible experiences, and lays out best practices for implementing them.

Using self-regulation feedback loop models, the fourth chapter by Jenna A. Van Fossen, Chu-Hsiang Chang, and Russell E. Johnson bridges the goal setting and careers literatures with the occupational stress literature by demonstrating how the distance from one's goals and the speed at which one is moving to achieve them can impact well-being as well as how these processes may play out over the career cycle. The fifth chapter by Youjeong Huh and Michael T. Ford takes a step back and investigates how occupational stress processes not only change over the life course, but how they may also shift across generations. Their chapter provides unique insights into generational differences in expectations of work and adaptation to workplace stressors.

Leading off the section on methodological best practices and innovations in the assessment of occupational stress and well-being, the sixth chapter by Rachel S. Rauvola, Cort W. Rudolph, and Hannes Zacher provides a review of temporal issues in the study of occupational stress and well-being as well as covering the time-based assumptions surrounding time lags in research. They also helpfully provide guidance on best practices for longitudinal study design and provide a tutorial with both data and code for individuals interested in implementing robust approaches to analyzing longitudinal models. In the seventh chapter, Stuti Thapa, Louis Tay, and Daphne Hou examine phenomena and models on a shorter time frame by reviewing and presenting best practices for designing, implementing, and analyzing experience sampling studies. Such models allow researchers to investigate not just general trends in how occupational stress and well-being can change over time, but also accounts for, and can help provide meaning to, variability in such experiences on a shorter timeframe. The eighth chapter by Kristin Lee Sotak and Barry A. Friedman expands on this issue of variability in occupational stress and well-being to investigate specific patterns in levels over different time frames, to enhance our understanding of both regular and aberrant shifts in affective experiences, and how such patterns can be used to provide nuance to phenomena that is often lost when aggregating data across time. The final chapter by Rachel M. Saef, Emorie Beck, and Joshua J. Jackson builds on the insights presented throughout these other chapters by using multi-wave idiographic techniques to move beyond trends for single variables to consider the relationships between variables themselves as indicators and predictors of occupational stress and well-being.

Our goal for this issue was to challenge our field to think about occupational stress and well-being as it is experienced, as a dynamic process unfolding over time. We could not be happier with our author teams and how they rose to the challenge of reflecting so many novel and important ideas, not just in terms of theory and methods, but also in terms of implementation in both research and practice. This volume represents the very best of the insightful and cutting-edge work going on in our field and we are thrilled to be able to assemble it here together in the present volume of *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being*.

**Peter D. Harms, Pamela L. Perrewé, and
Chu-Hsiang (Daisy) Chang**

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THE PURPOSE AND WORK STRESS MODEL: CONTEXTUALIZING THE ROLE OF PURPOSE ON AND FOLLOWING STRESSFUL WORK EXPERIENCES

Patrick L. Hill, Rachel D. Best and M. Teresa Cardador

ABSTRACT

Personality research often has focused on how people change in response to the work environment, given that work constitutes a significant portion of the daily life of adults. However, most research has failed to consider the effect of the work context on purpose in life. This omission is surprising given that purpose research involves several characteristics that align well with the occupational psychology and organizational behavior literatures. The current research considers how one feature of the work context, work stress, may (or may not) facilitate the purpose development process. We put forth a Purpose and Work Stress (PAWS) model which explains why understanding whether work stress is perceived as harmful or challenging to employees can provide significant insight into whether that occupation is aligned with the individual's purpose in life. Furthermore, the model highlights that the ability to monitor and interpret work stress may help an individual identify and cultivate their purpose. Implications of the PAWS model are described, including how it may help us understanding the roles for retirement and job crafting on purpose.

Keywords: Purpose in life; work stress; Purpose and Work Stress model; work experiences; personality; work engagement

Examining and Exploring the Shifting Nature of Occupational Stress and Well-Being
Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being, Volume 19, 1–17

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ISSN: 1479-3555/doi:[10.1108/S1479-355520210000019001](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-355520210000019001)

A central goal of personality psychology is to understand individual behavior and motivations (Funder, 1997; McAdams & Pals, 2006), which requires a discussion of how individuals differ from one another as well as the consideration of which contexts and factors hold influence on behavior across individuals. During adulthood, work provides one of the more universal contexts as almost all adults engage in some type of occupational work, and people may change occupations several times across adulthood. Simultaneously, occupations are known to change people in several ways, as people respond and adapt to the feedback received regarding more accepted versus discouraged behaviors. Indeed, the notion that the workplace can shape employees' personality has been supported by a wealth of research over the years (e.g., Hudson & Roberts, 2016; Hudson, Roberts, & Lodi-Smith, 2012; Li, Fay, Frese, Harms, & Gao, 2014).

However, largely missing from this discussion are two central pieces. First, researchers have tended to focus on a small set of personality traits, missing the opportunity to expand across other components of personality. Given that personality psychology is viewed as the study of the full individual, researchers have noted that studies may be failing to achieve this goal given a relative paucity of consideration beyond the Big Five traits (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Indeed, that work underscores the need to also consider individuals' motivations, goals, and life stories when trying to capture the full personality picture. Second, most of the literature has described how work shapes personality development over the span of years, rather than considering more proximal timeframes. Beyond the work context, this issue is prominent throughout personality development research, insofar as limited attention has been paid to how individual event sequences, or daily happenings, can build toward longer-term shifts in the individual's dispositional characteristics (though see Wrzus & Roberts, 2017). Put together, when considering how work may induce personality change over time, there is a need to both understand the role of work context on adult personality development both as a function of different personality constructs beyond traits, as well as to consider how micro-level changes can induce longer-term shifts in the individual's personality.

The current article addresses both of these points in the process of considering how one aspect of work, stress in daily life, may shape and be shaped by an individual's purpose in life. To provide a foundation for this discussion, we start by reviewing the literature noting that work environments "teach" individuals which personality traits are more valuable to themselves and others. Moving beyond dispositional traits, we next consider how work shapes another aspect of one's personality, namely their purpose in life, defined as the overarching goal that helps define the individual and set a direction for that person to take in life (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Ryff, 1989). Moreover, some research suggests that purposeful people may react differently to work stressors. Building from this somewhat nascent literature, we proceed to discuss how the workplace may influence their employees' sense of purpose, and more broadly, help them to find and engage with their purposes for life. We then introduce the Purpose and Work Stress (PAWS) model, proposing that work stress plays an important role in helping employees understand what they do and do not want for their future, and, thus, shapes the direction they wish to take for life.

WORK AND PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

To start, it is worth providing evidence that work environments do appear to shape how individuals change and develop their personalities during adulthood; again, the primary target of this work has been investigations into personality traits, focusing on the Big Five traits (John & Srivastava, 1999). With evidence mounting in favor of the position that individuals hold the capacity for personality trait change throughout the lifespan (e.g., Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006), researchers started turning to the work context as a potential environment facilitative of these changes. This movement was perhaps an obvious direction, given that such a large portion of adult life is spent in the workplace. One survey suggests that work constitutes over two-fifths of the average adult's daily life (Gallup, 2014). Moreover, work can prescribe norms for patterns for behaviors, emotions (or emotional expressions), and thoughts, commonly viewed as the three central components of a personality trait (Roberts, 2009; Roberts & Jackson, 2008). Accordingly, work then has centered on how work investments and engagements influence personality trait development.

Research on Work Engagements and Personality Trait Change

One personality trait frequently investigated in the literature is conscientiousness, which is a dispositional characteristic often valued by employers (Behling, 1998). Conscientiousness reflects a broad personality dimension that captures individuals' dispositional tendencies toward greater achievement striving, orderliness, self-control, and industriousness (Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards, & Hill, 2014). The trait has been shown to predict a wide array of positive work outcomes, such as greater job satisfaction (Furnham, Eracleous, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009), organizational citizenship behavior (Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009), and job performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Moreover, conscientiousness is associated with a reduced likelihood that individuals engage in negative, counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Scherer, Baysinger, Zolynsky, & LeBreton, 2013). However, this association may be more bidirectional than initially expected. Indeed, research has found that employees who engage in fewer counterproductive behaviors also tend to become more conscientious over time (Hudson & Roberts, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012).

Another trait that seemingly has a reciprocal relationship with the work environment is neuroticism, which is described by greater anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional lability, and self-conscious emotions (John & Srivastava, 1999). For instance, counterproductive work behaviors may be linked to greater neuroticism longitudinally (Roberts et al., 2006), whereas work satisfaction relates to long-term decreases on the trait (Scollon & Diener, 2006). In addition, some research suggests that greater income level predicts declines in neuroticism over time (Sutin, Costa, Miech, & Eaton, 2009). Regarding the other Big Five traits, limited findings have shown that agreeableness (Hudson et al., 2012), extraversion (Scollon & Diener, 2006), and openness to experience (Nieß & Zacher, 2015) also may hold bidirectional associations with work variables.

It is worth noting that work has expanded beyond the Big Five personality traits, as researchers also have considered personality composites more theoretically linked to work success. One construct that has received significant attention is proactive personality, reflecting an ability to plan for the future, readiness for change, perseverance, and recognition of opportunities (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Frese & Fay, 2001; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Longitudinal research demonstrates, similar to conscientiousness, that job variables and proactive personality show correlated changes over time (Li et al., 2014). Specifically, employees with more demanding jobs and who have greater job control appear to be more likely to exhibit increases in proactive personality over time.

Multiple theoretical frameworks are available for explaining why the workplace provides a formative context for personality development. For instance, several of the studies above described their findings as evidence for the corresponsive principle (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003), which suggests that the personality characteristics that lead to rewarding experiences (e.g., better health, job success, etc.) are more likely to be deepened or strengthened by those experiences. Similar models have proposed that conscientiousness is associated with greater investment in different life domains (work, family, relationships, etc.), which in turn leads to the accrual of benefits that motivate people toward maintaining or increasing on conscientiousness (Hill & Jackson, 2016). These benefits may include experiencing better health or well-being, and in support, research does suggest that changes in subjective well-being may catalyze or at least coincide with personality trait change (Soto, 2015).

In sum, there is now significant evidence for three main conclusions. First, personality characteristics predict who succeeds in their career or engages in counterproductive work behavior. Second, the workplace provides an important context in which personality development may occur during adulthood, in part because it is a primary context for life activities at that time. Third, theoretical frameworks have explained these changes by focusing on dynamic associations between personality and work roles. However, a broader understanding of how work shapes personality requires consideration beyond personality traits or dispositional composites. Toward this end, we suggest it is worth considering how work shapes purpose in life, a construct that captures and combines multiple aspects of personality psychology, including one's goals, identity, and dispositional tendencies (Pfund, 2020).

DEFINING PURPOSE AND DESCRIBING ITS ROLE IN WORK CONTEXTS

A large literature in occupational and vocational psychology has noted that work holds strong implications for personal well-being and life satisfaction (see Warr, 2003 for a review). One explanation for this intimate connection between work and well-being is that work provides individuals the opportunity to pursue their personally important life goals, aligned with definitions of what it means to have a vocation (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Within personality and developmental

psychology, the importance of the work context for purpose in life is evident in multiple conceptualizations of the construct. One's purpose in life has been described as a self-organizing life aim that directs daily activities and resource allocation toward goal progress, while serving to help reify and define oneself (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Similarly, theoretical accounts view purpose as a source of direction and objectives for life (Ryff, 1989), as well as catalyst for making personal commitments (Hill, Edmonds, Luyckx, Peterson, & Andrews, 2016), and for general life engagement (Scheier et al., 2006). It has been described as providing people with a compass that guides them through their day-to-day lives (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009).

Given these definitions, the potential connection between purpose and work is apparent. For several adults, a portion of their daily activities, engagements, and progress toward personal objectives occurs at work. Moreover, the selection of and commitment to occupational positions can reflect a personal effort to find a path that is most personally rewarding and self-defining. The development of a purpose in life can come through multiple routes (Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014), including proactively engaging with the exploration process, reacting to major life events, or through learning about goals and pursuits from others. With respect to work, one can envision these pathways playing out, respectively, in the form of trying different jobs, experiencing "epiphanies" about which jobs or aspects of work are most personally relevant, and receiving guidance from family members or mentors within an occupation regarding how to live purposefully in that career.

Two lines of research have demonstrated a connection between purpose and work, which reflect an important methodological and conceptual distinction in the purpose literature – namely between understanding someone's specific purpose in life, and how purposeful that individual feels. The first approach either asks people whether they have committed to a purpose in life, and if so, to freely describe what that purpose is (Burrow & Hill, 2013; Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010), or tries to capture the individual's purpose by asking them to rate their commitment to different potential life goals (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, Lapsley, & Quaranto, 2010). Herein, we employ the term *purpose in life* to refer to the individual's actual goal or broader direction in life, and, thus, a construct that is more akin to goals and motives rather than traits in personality science.

The second approach is more agnostic to the idiosyncratic nature of the person's purpose, and instead focuses on assessing "sense of purpose" (e.g., Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This method is more aligned with considering purpose from the perspective of a personality trait, and provides an easy-to-implement measure that can allow for between-person comparisons regardless of individual differences with respect to what that purpose actually is. In this paper, *sense of purpose* will refer to the extent to which one feels purposeful or directed in daily life, a variable that can be more readily compared across participants regardless of their specific personal goals. Thus, while purpose in life refers to one's commitment to a direction in life, sense of purpose is personality trait that relates to the extent that one feels purposeful from day-to-day. Both are important to consider because although they presumably relate positively to one another, they reflect different aspects of leading a purposeful life.

The first line of research finds that several people often mention work when describing a purpose in life, something that appears to start early in the lifespan. For instance, when asked to define what purpose means, roughly one-sixth of adolescents mentioned that it involves occupational or financial success (Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010). Later in the lifespan, research shows college students tend to report moderate levels of commitment to occupational success as a life goal (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, et al., 2010). Moreover, when these individuals reported increased commitment to occupational goals during the transition to adulthood, they tended to report a greater sense of purpose later in life (Hill et al., 2011). The adolescent and younger adult years may be essential periods for finding a purpose through work, as it reflects a period when individuals are starting to find the position that best reflects their personal interests and values. Given that life tasks are changing throughout adulthood (Havighurst, 1972; Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, & Specht, 2014), it is important to recognize that the work context may play a lesser role in shaping someone's purpose in life later in the lifespan (Settersten, 1992).

The second line of work points to how the loss of work presents as a risk factor for purposelessness among older adults. Indeed, retired adults report slightly lower levels for sense of purpose relative to working adults (Pinquart, 2002). Longitudinal work suggests that retired adults are more likely to decline on sense of purpose even when controlling for age, whereas working adults maintain relatively stable levels for sense of purpose over the same timeframe (Hill & Weston, 2019). When considering adults still in the workplace, recent research demonstrates that changes in work satisfaction appear linked to those in sense of purpose (Weston et al., 2021). Put together, it appears that subjective career success may help people feel more purposeful, which may help explain why losing that work environment can put some adults at risk for purposelessness.

THE PAWS FRAMEWORK

A connection between work stress and sense of purpose aligns with the broader literature linking sense of purpose to personal health and well-being. Studies demonstrate that sense of purpose is associated with better subjective well-being during adolescence (Burrow & Hill, 2011), emerging adulthood (Hill et al., 2016), middle adulthood (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and later in life (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). Moreover, sense of purpose longitudinally predicts reduced risk for a wide array of health concerns, ranging from cardiovascular issues (Kim, Sun, Park, Kubzansky, & Peterson, 2013) to infirmity (Boyle, Buchman, & Bennett, 2010) and even earlier mortality (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016). Accordingly, in addition to the conceptual and empirical connection to work, there are several reasons for researchers to turn their attention to work as a context for purpose development. Another reason is that there are existing literatures and intervention programs that such research can build upon, including research on meaningful work (Wrzesniewski, 2003) and personal calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

When considering why sense of purpose impacts health and well-being in multiple domains, it is valuable to consider the role that it may hold for the stress response process. Most of the research to this point has focused on perceived stress overall rather than focused within a single domain, such as work. Multiple cross-sectional studies have demonstrated that purposeful individuals tend to report lower levels of stress in general (e.g., Hill et al., 2016; Scheier et al., 2006). Moreover, even when people report a daily stressor, it appears that they are less perturbed by it (Hill, Sin, Turiano, Burrow, & Almeida, 2018). In that study, participants were asked to report at the end-of-the-day whether they had experienced a stressor, along with their daily affect and physical symptoms. Sense of purpose was shown to interact with stressor occurrence to predict that day's negative affect and physical symptom reports such that purposeful people reported less of an increase on these outcomes on days when they reported a stressor.

It is interesting to note that participants in that study did not actually report fewer stressors in daily life (Hill et al., 2018). In fact, follow-up analyses show that sense of purpose was *positively* associated with stressor occurrence in the work context (Hill, 2019). Put together, these findings suggest a nuanced relationship regarding sense of purpose and stress, particularly regarding work stress. Moreover, they speak to the need to consider stress in daily life, rather than simply focus on how purposeful people report perceived stress in retrospective reports.

Toward considering stress within the work context and in daily life, we develop the PAWS model, which is represented in Fig. 1.1. Given that the purpose and stress literature above has focused on *sense of purpose*, we also will center our discussion on that construct here in the model. As such, when referring to “purposeful” individuals or employees, we are referring to those people who feel a stronger sense of direction in their lives. However, in the longer-term, the proposed model also may hold insights into how individuals develop or find a *purpose in life* through work experiences, as we discuss after the formulation of the PAWS model.

PURPOSEFUL STRESS AND PURPOSELESS STRESS

In multiple models of stress response, the first stage of the process involves appraising whether the event is threatening, benign, or a challenge (Dewe, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). One might expect purpose to play a role at this stage, as individuals should be more likely to appraise a stressful event as a challenge when that event aligns with pursuing their broader life direction. Research finds that purposeful individuals have greater hope that they can navigate daily obstacles (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009) and are more likely to build perseverance over time (Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016). Health psychologists then note that if the individual views the stressor event as non-benign, secondary appraisal occurs and involves asking oneself whether one has sufficient resources for dealing with the stressor (Dewe, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Purposeful workers may be more likely to view greater resources available for dealing with the stress at work, in line with the belief that having a purpose promotes adaptive

resource allocation and accrual (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). On the other hand, the ability or inability to deal successfully with daily stressors may alert the individual to what they feel they can and cannot accomplish in the workplace.

As such, the stress and coping literature provides insights into why purposeful employees may better deal with work stressors, as well as how stressors can shape purpose development. During primary appraisal, purposeful individuals are likely to view events more as benign or challenges rather than harmful, and at secondary appraisal, they are likely to view themselves as equipped with the sufficient resources to deal with the event. Moreover, challenges may help individuals understand their strengths and which activities are more personally meaningful to them, whereas the realization of resources to deal with a given stressor may help employees understand the tasks or occupations for which they are better or worse suited. Alternatively, work stressors may be more problematic when they lead the employee to feel totally overwhelmed, or with a reduced sense of knowing what direction to take next.

Some readers may recognize a connection here with the literature on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), which helps individuals grapple with the direction for their lives (e.g., [Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006](#) for a review). A common ACT practice involves having individuals go through their daily activities, and identify which ones are more or less personally valued. This process helps the individual recognize which activities they should engage with more in their lives, and which ones are less important or should be removed. In time, the hope is that individuals recognize what is more personally valued and shift their resources to those goals and activities, and away from tasks that cause anxiety and are not worth their energy. The literature on ACT points to its potential to help workers with particularly high stress levels ([Brinkborg, Michanek, Hesser, & Berglund, 2011](#)). Returning to the pathways to purpose literature ([Hill et al., 2014](#)), it may be the case that ACT approaches allow individuals to react to and reflect upon major work events, and see where they fit within broader life directions.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP: HOW PURPOSEFUL WORK STRESS LEADS TO PURPOSE IN WORK

This literature on ACT provides a bridge to the potential for stressful or challenging events to actually imbue a greater sense of purpose. Recent theoretical frameworks have noted that the extent to which an activity provides one with a sense of purpose and meaning may help people understand which ultimate aims to pursue ([Moran, 2020](#)). Specifically, after a given action, people gain information on the extent to which that action impacted others, and ultimately whether it produced an effect that “matters” to the actor. In that model, this mattering was discussed as a recognition of whether it promoted the common good, although the reflection process could be more internally focused as well. This theoretical framework holds great similarity to the literature on work meaningfulness. Indeed, researchers have discussed how employees will be more likely to make sense of their work