

ABSTRACT OF: HIV AND HUMAN BEING*

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A few phenomenological studies have attempted to describe how HIV impacts upon an individual's meaning and purpose in life. By asking the individuals themselves, using semi-structured interviews, these researchers have assigned HIV+ individuals into groups depending upon how their diagnosis has affected their ability to find life meaningful. The current study uses Focusing to try to gain a deeper understanding of these meaning groups and of the specific experience of HIV+ gay men.

Focusing was included in this study for three reasons:

1. To encourage a deeper self-reflection than usual in phenomenological studies so that participant's responses could be placed in the context of *how* they experience.
2. To assess whether there is a correlation between level of experiencing (related to the Experiencing Scale - EXP) and finding meaning in being HIV+.
3. To offer participants an experience that might be personally engaging and rewarding in exchange for their time and generosity.

The individuals in this study were recruited through an advertisement in a London HIV Newsletter. After agreeing to participate, each person was met once in his home for a session that lasted 2-4 hours. The session consisted of a semi-structured interview, a session of Focusing on feelings or concerns evoked during the interview, and a post-Focusing questionnaire that assessed their impressions of the Focusing experience.

The Focusing session became a crucial part of the study and clarified the meaning of many of the interview responses. For example, the Focusing session revealed that two participants whose interview responses indicated a 'Shattered Meaning' response to living with HIV, were in fact in very different processes of meaning ascription. 'John's' EXP level was at stage 2-3 during his Focusing session and it was difficult for him to contemplate facing his feelings. He was unable to adjust to the reality of being HIV and could not find any meaning in his present life. 'Glen's' EXP level during Focusing was at stage 5-6 and he had been actively involved in fighting HIV early on and in supporting friends who were dying from the virus. After organising fourteen funerals, Glen was the last survivor of his social group and was himself ill with an AIDS diagnosis. To him life also had lost meaning. But his 'Shattered Meaning' seemed to be a deep response to multiple bereavement, plus the anticipation of dying alone, without the support he'd given others.

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In this way Focusing not only added rich detail to participant's responses, but it also revealed conceptual issues, new questions, and fine distinctions that were previously concealed. It also raised the possibility that the participant's level of experiencing was having an impact on their response to HIV. It had been proposed in other studies that over time most individuals would move from an initial 'Shattered Meaning' response to their HIV diagnosis to eventually engaging meaningfully with the new realities of their life. It was assumed that time was the salient variable in this process. The Focusing sessions suggest that it is not time, but level of experiencing that influences an individual's meaning in living with HIV.

Of the six participants, the ones who said HIV was not relevant to their lives or the ones who found their lives lost meaning were also consistently the participants who scored at the lowest EXP levels, 2/3 typically. The participants who found HIV had brought a profound change in the meaning of their lives, and expressed gratitude for what they have learned, exhibited a much deeper stage of experiencing, EXP 5/6. Years since diagnosis was not a predictor of degree of meaning. Although the small sample size (six participants) makes this inconclusive, the current study does support the view that HIV+ individuals who pay attention to their experience at a 'deeper' level are more likely to find a way to re-engage meaningfully in life.

Another important reason for including Focusing in phenomenological studies is that participants value it. All the participants who focused enjoyed the session and four of the men felt they learned something new during the session. Three of the men experienced significant felt shifts in their understandings of themselves and were grateful for this. In Glen's words,

' ... strange, I haven't talked about it to this extent for some time, well actually not in this way at all. It's not been this deep to anybody before. It just seems like, a strange feeling. It's like I've finally admitted something, it's like sort of being an alcoholic and saying I'm an alcoholic'.

The present study certainly supports, for various reasons, including a Focusing aspect to phenomenological studies.