

## Reshaping our meaning in life to cope with uncertainty

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*"You do not have to suffer to learn. But, if you don't learn from suffering, over which you have no control, then your life becomes truly meaningless".*

Viktor E. Frankl

Many authors have compared the times we are living in with *La Peste* by Albert Camus<sup>1-3</sup>. In his masterpiece, the French writer narrated the outbreak of a plague epidemic in the Algerian city of Oran and took it as an expedient to explore existential issues, such as death, love, sympathy, and hope<sup>4</sup>. Like *La Peste*, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed human beings to reflect on their own lives. Many people have taken the forced isolation as an opportunity to reflect inward, explore their deepest fears and frustrations, and examine the uncountable challenges that this experience is posing and will eventually arise in the future. Like *La Peste*, COVID-19 has disclosed the fragility of human existence and the meaninglessness of materialistic belongings. Ultimately, it has compelled individuals to re-modulate their own existences.

We are now living in times of uncertainty: we are forced to live day by day with no possibility of long-term planning. Since the beginning of the pandemic, uncertainty and ambiguity have been pervasive and perceived at different levels: *individuals* are struggling between the human need of connecting to the other people and the peacefulness of isolation; *society* is discussing the apparent conflict between freedom and determinism; *politics* is continuously changing the rules according to the pandemic trends and the diffusion of new variants. Even *science* is uncertain. Indeed, we are still lacking a sophisticated understanding of the COVID-19 disease process as well as its longer-term outcomes, including quality of life, physical disability, and psychosocial morbidity<sup>5,6</sup>.

The uncertainty of our times is impeding and undeniable. Although Zygmunt Bauman said that "Fear is the name we give to our uncertainty"<sup>7</sup>, we could argue that uncertainty has a different denomination nowadays. In fact, fear is an emotional state that stems from situations of actual risk, where the causes of danger are clearly determined and perceived: fear of isolation, fear of contagion, fear of death. Nonetheless, our emotions are not always related to the tangible danger of the virus, but rather to the threatening atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity that is currently surrounding our existence. Our emotion is more like a sense of restlessness, a sort of inexplicable internal torment. Our emotion is not fear, but rather anxiety, anguish.

In the attempt of annihilating this feeling of anxiety, similar to the *La Peste* scenario, today we are seeing the *mise-en-scène* of the most disparate human types, with their most peculiar and profound traits. Some individuals deny the existence of the virus, others are completely devoted to the community. Some people undermine the severity of the situation in the

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attempt of exorcising the menace, others take advantage of it to enrich themselves. The members of the antivaccine moment are themselves victims of a cognitive dissonance<sup>8</sup>, that is the conflict between their strong beliefs and the negative feedbacks and criticisms received from the larger environment. This tension leads them to resolve their stress by sticking even more firmly to their value system and supporting public figures with the same ideas.

These sparse reactions and attitudes likely hide the innermost necessity to find a new meaning in life. Our horizonless present makes the existence of many of us frustratingly empty, pointless, and lacking meaning. However, it is important to remind that meaning in life represents a crucial mechanism of resilience and coping that helps safeguard individual psychological wellbeing within difficult times and stressful circumstances<sup>9-11</sup>. Meaning in life may offer a sense of fulfill-

ment and purpose and can help an individual pursue and accomplish personally important goals<sup>12</sup>. In times of uncertainty, meaningfulness may enable individuals to draw strengths and insights from their experiences, gain perspectives, and provide a pathway towards a worthwhile and valuable life<sup>13</sup>.

COVID-19 should be considered as a unique opportunity to reshape our meaning in life. Meaning in life may not only differ from one person to another but can be different at each period of an individual's life. In this sense, Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, best-known for his psychological memoir "Man's Search for Meaning"<sup>14</sup>, may represent an example. Frankl claimed that, under any circumstances, people can consciously choose to act with dignity and responsibility. The alternative is to just fully embrace *La Peste*, the "absurdity" of life where everything happens with no explanations.

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