

# **THE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEANING OF LIFE, DEPRESSION, STRESS AND ANXIETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present research is determining whether the meaning of life, depression, stress, and anxiety among university students are correlated; and whether the meaning of life predicts depression, stress, and anxiety. The universe of the present research is the students of Necmettin Erbakan University, Ahmet Kelesoglu Faculty of Education. The work group is 320 students selected among the universe via random cluster sampling method. As data collection tools, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), and adapted to Turkish by Akin and Cetin (2007); “The Meaning in Life Questionnaire” (MLQ) developed by Steger et al. and adapted to Turkish by Akin and Tas (2011); and information form developed by the researchers were used. The transfer of the data into computer is on-going; and correlation and regression analyses were used in data analysis. We found a significant correlation between meaning of life, and depression, anxiety, and stress among the university students in the work group. The meaning of life of university students in the work group predicts depression, anxiety, and stress at a significant level.

**Key Words:** Meaning of Life, Depression, Stress, Anxiety

**Introduction:**

There are many definitions of the meaning of life in the literature (Yalom, 2001; Quinn, 2002; Eaglaton, 2007; Arda, 2011; Frankl, 2012; Goka, 2013). However, finding a common agreement on the definition of the meaning of life doesn't seem possible. It is possible to claim that the number of the definitions of the meaning of life is equal to the number of people on the earth. Because, even though religions-beliefs, ideologies, movements etc. present common grounds related to the meaning of life in general, each person experiences these common grounds individually basically. This experience is private and subjective (Bas, 2014). Therefore, even presenting an objective meaning of life seem possible notionally; it is not possible in practice. "A satisfactory written answer to the question of meaning of life has achieved to flee from the understanding of the all great philosophers" (Yalom, 2001: 661). Still, there are many explanations on how to define the meaning of life in the literature. The meaning of life is maybe not a purpose went after or a pile of reality scanned through; it is the thing that finds noise in the exact acquisition of living or a certain life style. Consequently, the meaning of a narration is not just the end or purpose of it, but the own process of narration (Eaglaton, 2007: 50).

Life has not one but many meanings including the private and unique meanings in my own life. There is no constant meaning in life; the meaning can always change, but never disappears. According to Frankl's understanding, the real meaning of life is not within the individual, but in the outer world. People need to exceed themselves, be in search to find the meaning; and they already have the appropriate structure (Goka, 2013: 114-128).

According to Mckenzie, making of a meaning to life is an interpretative approach that determines an individual's attitude towards their existence and reality in the world. Someone who determines their attitude towards this reality will pursue their life in this direction. They will shape their lives and behaviours, and determine their principles accordingly. Therefore, making of a meaning for life includes the values that are the primary principles that direct their behaviours and belief related confirmations (Cited in: Akinci, 2005: 11). The meaning of life changes from person to person constantly. For this reason, defining the meaning of life via general terms is impossible. Questions related to the meaning of life related cannot be answered with general expressions. The meaning of life varies from person to person, from day to day, from hour to hour. What is important therefore is not the meaning of life in general, but the special meaning of the life of a person in a certain time (Frankl, 2012: 93-122-123).

According to Yalom (2001: 664), there are two types of meaning of life.

- *The cosmic meaning of life;* is said to be in western Jewish-Christian religious tradition that, it is based on a comprehensive meaning schema in which the world and human life are a part of plan ordered by the God, human life should be devoted to the effort to resemble the God, the God represents the perfect, and therefore, the purpose of life is struggling for perfection.
- *The terrestrial meaning of life;* Yalom mentions some factors that will make life meaningful (except for the religion) instead of a certain definition, while he tells us about the terrestrial meaning of life. These are altruism, devotion to a cause, creativity, and self-actualization (explanation related to these concepts will be

provided in the section on the sources that give meaning to life). Giving meaning to life refers to finding satisfactory answers to the questions related to the world an individual lives in and the creation around them (Akinci, 2005: 7).

Finding meaning in life is correlated negatively or positively with mental health in the general sense, and depression, anxiety, and stress in the specific sense, which has been revealed by many researches. In general terms, the existence of a meaning in life is an important factor for the positive mental states of humans such as; hope and satisfaction with life (Ryff, 1989), psychological well-being (De Klerk et al. 2009), positive mental health (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). Additionally, there are many researches that found negative correlations between the existence of the meaning with depression and anxiety (Ryff, 1989; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992; Mascaro and Rosen, 2005), depression (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992; Mascaro and Rosen, 2005), depression and psychopathological tendencies (Arda, 2011).

Previous researches have found correlations between the absence of meaning in life and stress, burnout, and suicidal ideation (Harlow, Newcomb and Bentler, 1986), neuroticism (Jaarsma et al., 2007), self-alienation and openness to external effects (Akin and Tas, 2011), alcoholism, substance dependence, and neuroticism (Jaarsma et al., 2007), and pathology and anxiety (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992).

Depression is a condition that reveals with some emotional, mental, behavioural, and physical symptoms. The most prominent symptom is collapsed mood, and apparent decrease of interest and pleasure. A depressed individual is unhappy, pessimistic, and hopeless sensually. They cannot even enjoy what they used to love. Depression is a psychological disorder, which is common among

children, adolescents, adults, and old. It occurs as a combination of worry, loneliness, anger, insignificance, hopelessness, nervousness, and guilt along with some physical symptoms (Sharp and Lipsky, 2002). Anxiety and depression have some common symptoms, and they differ with specific features. General restlessness, and negative affection are common symptoms of anxiety and depression, but over-stimulation physiologically is specific to anxiety, while absence of positive affection is specific to depression (Brown, Chorpita, Korotitsch and Barlow, 1997). Depression is one of the most common psychological disorders among young people, that causes serious disorders in psycho-social and academic functions, and prevents overcoming developmental problems. Depression can occur among adolescents in the same way with adults, or it can be masked by period-specific problems such as anti-social behaviours and learning disability (Kaya, Genc, Kaya, Pehlivan, 2007).

Anxiety is a warning for 'being alert'. It is a reaction to an inner, uncertain or based on an inner conflict threat. Anxiety is a feeling of fear or worry that is difficult to define. This feeling can be accompanied by a number of sensations in the body. Sensations such as the sense of chest tightness, heartthrob, sweating, headache, hollow feeling in the stomach and immediate need to go to toilet can be examples. Restlessness and need to wander around are also among the most common symptoms of anxiety. Experiencing of anxiety without the existence of a concrete threat in a frequent and immense manner, and its affecting the daily of the individual indicate the anxiety disorder (Turkcapar, 2004). Anxiety is mentioned in psychoanalysis as the most excruciating feeling that an individual can experience and the function of ego. According to Freud, anxiety contributes the functions of warning individuals against the

threats from the physical or social environment, necessary adaptation, and maintaining life. On the other hand, like neurotic anxiety, anxiety loses the function of helping adaptation if it turns out to insubstantial and illogical; and becomes the source of abnormal behaviours (Gectan, 2008). The anxiety experienced occasionally by everyone in daily life is realistic anxiety. It is equal to the sense of fear. It differs from neurotic anxiety by being rational and understandable. On the other hand, neurotic anxiety, without a reason as a phobic reaction to a harmless object is always irrational. In general, anxiety is a common symptom of both anxiety disorders and depressive disorders (Chorpita and Barlow, 1998).

Stress is the condition of nuisance and uneasiness that is felt as a result of events encountered in daily life and the pressure in human relations. Even stress can have positive features in such that individuals feel excited rather than nervous, and perceive it a problem that needs to be solved; it is defined as a threat against physical and psychological wellbeing and life quality. Stress is a complicated issue, but it is generally defined as a physical, mental or emotional reaction caused by the reactions of individuals to environmental tensions, conflicts, pressures and similar stimulants (Newbury-Birch and Kamali, 2001). According to Lazarus, stress occurs when individuals understand that they cannot cope with the requirements of an external condition (Cassim, 2013). Stress is defined as a bodily reaction to a nonexclusive volition loaded on the body. Stress may cause us experience positive or negative feelings. Stress is a concept that has affects individuals, and their behaviours and relations with other individuals. Stress is not a condition that occurs for no reason or spontaneously. Stress occurs when the changes in the environment affect the individuals (Guclu, 2001).

Stress is a concept that includes both stimulant, and behaviour, and the interaction between these two. Additionally, stress is an adaptive behaviour presented via individual differences and/or psychological process, and occurs as a result of the reaction on the organism of an environmental act, condition or event that creates a psychological and/or physical over pressure. The evaluation of human perceptions and experiences underline the stress, and giving meaning to, evaluating and leading experiences are the main factors in increasing or decreasing stress (Kaya, Genc, Kaya, Pehlivan, 2007). Stress is frequently associated with feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression.

The purpose of the present research is examining the correlations between the meaning of life and depression, anxiety and stress among university students, revealing the predictor correlations between the meaning in life (the Presence of Meaning in Life, and the Search for Meaning in Life), and depression, anxiety, and stress, and examining whether meaning in life, depression, anxiety and stress varies by gender.

1-Is there a significant correlation between meaning in life (presence, search), and depression, anxiety, and stress among university students?

2- Does meaning in life (presence, search) among university students predict depression, anxiety, and stress at a significant level?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The present research adopted relational screening model. Work group of the research is formed by 237 female, 83 male; a total of 320 university students (age average: 20.75) who were selected via random cluster sampling method among students who study in the province of Konya and voluntarily participated in the research. The data of the present research were collected in October, 2013.

## **Data Collection Tools**

### *1. Personal Information Form*

Personal Information Form used in the present research was developed by the researchers in order to collect information on the socio-demographic features of the participants.

### *2- The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)*

MLQ was developed by Steger et al. (2006) and adapted to Turkish by Akin and Tas (2011). The questionnaire consists of 10 items and two sub-dimensions. Internal consistency reliability coefficients of MLQ were calculated as .77 for the Presence of Meaning in Life sub-scale, .83 for the Search for Meaning in Life sub-scale, and .81 for the whole scale. Test-retest reliability coefficients obtained with a 4-week interval were calculated as .89 for the Presence of Meaning in Life sub-scale, .92 for the Search for Meaning in Life sub-scale, and .94 for the whole scale. These findings indicate that Turkish version of MLQ is a valid and reliable measurement tool (Tas, 2011).

### *3- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS)*

DASS was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), and adapted to Turkish by Akin and Cetin (2007). The scale consists of 42 items and three sub-dimensions (depression, anxiety, and stress).

The adaptation study was conducted on 590 university students, 121 teachers of English, and 136 individuals who had applied to clinics and psychological counselling centres because of emotional problems. Factor analysis resulted in that scale consisted of three factors as the original form, and factor loads ranged between .39 and .88. Discriminant validity results showed that scale discriminates between clinical and normal sample. Concordance validity scores of DASS respectively were .87 and



.84. Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as .89; and item total correlations were found to be between .51 and .75. Test-retest reliability score, and split-half reliability score of the scale were found as .99 and .96. These findings show that, DASS is a highly reliable and valid scale (Akin and Cetin, 2007).

### Data Analysis

Pearson product moment multiplication correlation coefficient was calculated in order to determine whether the correlation between meaning in life (presence-search) and depression, anxiety, and stress was significant; and multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to determine whether meaning in life predicted depression, stress, and anxiety.

### Findings

**Table 1**

The Correlation between the meaning in Life (Presence-Search) Depression, Anxiety, and Stress.

	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Presence of Meaning	-.498 (**)	-.272(**)	-.317(**)
Search for Meaning	.126(*)	.131(*)	.122(*)

\*\*. $p < .01$ , \*. $p < .05$

There are medium level negative significant correlations between *presence of meaning in life*, and depression and stress; and there is low level negative significant correlation between *presence of meaning in life*, and anxiety ( $p < .01$ ).

There are low level positive significant correlations between *search for meaning in life* and depression, anxiety, and stress ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 2**

Regression Analysis Results Related to the Meaning in Life's  
(Presence-Search) Strength of Predicting Depression

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>ch</sub>	F	β	t
Presence	<b>.510(a)</b>	<b>0.260</b>	<b>0.255</b>	<b>55.625</b>	<b>-0.494</b>	<b>-10.221</b>
Search					<b>0.109</b>	<b>2.245</b>

The regression analysis conducted for the meaning of life (presence-search) predicting depression revealed that, meaning of life is correlated with depression ( $R=.510$ ,  $F=55.625$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and the meaning in life (presence-search) can explain the 26% of the variance in depression, and presence of meaning ( $\beta= -0.494$ ), and search for meaning ( $\beta= 0.109$ ) are important indicators of depression.

**Table 3**

Regression Analysis Results Related to the Meaning in Life's  
(Presence-Search) Strength of Predicting Anxiety

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>ch</sub>	F	β	t
Presence	<b>.297(a)</b>	<b>0.088</b>	<b>0.083</b>	<b>15.383</b>	<b>-0.267</b>	<b>-4.984</b>
Search					<b>0.121</b>	<b>2.259</b>

The regression analysis conducted for the meaning of life (presence-search) predicting anxiety revealed that, meaning of life is correlated with anxiety ( $R=.297$ ,  $F=15.383$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and the meaning in life (presence-search) can explain the 8% of the variance in anxiety, and presence of meaning ( $\beta= -0.267$ ) and search for meaning ( $\beta= 0.121$ ) are important indicators of anxiety.

**Table 4**

Regression Analysis Results Related to the Meaning in Life's  
(Presence-Search) Strength of Predicting Stress

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>ch</sub>	F	β	t
Presence	<b>.336(a)</b>	<b>0.113</b>	<b>0.108</b>	<b>20.230</b>	<b>-0.314</b>	<b>-5.924</b>
Search					<b>0.112</b>	<b>2.108</b>

The regression analysis conducted for the meaning of life (presence-search) predicting stress revealed that, meaning of life is correlated with stress (R=.336, F=20.230,  $p < .05$ ) and the meaning in life (presence-search) can explain the 11% of the variance in stress, and presence of meaning ( $\beta = -0.314$ ) and search for meaning ( $\beta = 0.112$ ) are important indicators of stress.

### **Discussion**

The present research found significant negative correlations between presence of meaning in life and depression, stress, and anxiety. In other words, the presence of meaning lowers depression, stress and anxiety levels. Findings obtained in the present research are in agreement with the findings of the similar researches in the literature. These researches found positive significant correlations between presence of meaning in life and many different conditions/variables such as; hope and satisfaction with life (Ryff, 1989), life satisfaction (Tas, 2011), psychological wellbeing (De Klerk et al. 2009), positive mental health (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992), problem oriented overcoming, life quality (Arda, 2011), two sub-dimensions of indomitableness; personal strengths on resilience and positive self-evaluation (Demirbas, 2010), psychological wellbeing, positive personality features such as

extroversion, adaptability, honesty (Jaarsma et al. 2007), authentic life (Akin and Tas, 2011), and job satisfaction (Bektas, 2012).

The findings of the present research presented positive significant correlations between search for meaning in life and depression, stress, and anxiety. Similarly, the previous researches in the literature found correlations between absence of meaning in life and many conditions/variables. These researches found negative correlations between absence of meaning in life and stress, burnout and suicidal ideation (Harlow, Newcomb and Bentler, 1986), neuroticism (Jaarsma et al., 2007), self-alienation and openness to external effects (Akin and Taş, 2011), alcoholism, substance dependence, and neuroticism (Jaarsma et al., 2007), and pathology and anxiety (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). Many researches have been conducted that found negative correlations between meaning in life and many conditions/variables. According to these researches, meaning in life is negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Ryff, 1989; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992; Mascaro and Rosen, 2005), depression (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992; Mascaro and Rosen, 2005), and depression and psycho-pathological tendencies (Arda, 2011).

The presence of meaning in lives of individuals is closely related with overcoming psychological problems such as depression, stress and anxiety; and in general terms, psychological wellbeing. Presence of factors that give meaning to life enables individuals to overcome problems such as depression, stress, and anxiety.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The present research found that meaning in lives of the university students in the work group is correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress at a significant level. The meaning in lives of the university

students in the work group predicts depression, anxiety, and stress at a significant level.

Considering the correlation between meaning of life and depression, anxiety and stress, educational activities and programs can be organized in order to increase the present meaning in life.

The present research is limited to university students. Further researches on the subject matter can be conducted on different and larger groups.

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