

FC53: An Initial Evaluation of Online Meaning-Centered Groups (OMG) to Promote Psychological Well-Being and Reduce Distress in Older Adults

Authors: Marnin J. Heisel, Danielle Sinden, & the OMG Project Team

Objectives:

1. Consider the role of Meaning in Life (MIL) in potentially promoting psychological resiliency and well-being and reducing suicide risk among older adults;
2. Describe Online Meaning-Centered Groups (OMG) for older adults experiencing loneliness, social isolation, and/or psychological distress; &
3. Discuss preliminary findings from a study of OMG for Canadian Retirement Home and Community residents 60 and older, both during and following the COVID pandemic.

Key words: Meaning-Centered Groups; Online Interventions; Psychological Well-Being; Upstream Suicide Prevention

Background: The COVID pandemic had a negative impact on the health and well-being of older adults. As older adults additionally have among the highest rates of suicide globally, psychological distress due to lockdowns, fear of infection, and reduced access to mental healthcare and social supports threatened to increase suicide risk, necessitating innovative interventions. Online Meaning-Centered Groups (OMG) were designed to address this concern.

Objectives: To summarize initial findings of an on-going study to adapt, initially evaluate, and disseminate OMG for older adults potentially at-risk for suicide by virtue of loneliness, social isolation, or pandemic-related psychological distress.

Methods: Participants included English-speaking, cognitively-intact, Canadians 60 years and older, experiencing loneliness, social isolation, or psychological distress. Participants of all sexes and genders were recruited primarily via online advertisements for an 8-session, online course of OMG, adapted from Meaning-Centered Men's Groups (MCMG; Heisel et al., 2020) for men struggling with the retirement transition. Participants completed an online eligibility assessment, and were administered a demographics form, a cognitive screen, and measures of functioning, psychological risk and resiliency factors, and suicide ideation and behaviour. Eligible participants were invited to take part in a course of OMG, and to additionally complete online pre-, mid-, post-group, and 2-month follow-up assessments of psychological risk and resiliency factors and group process.

Results: Two courses of OMG have been delivered to date ($n = 15$), with a third planned for Spring-Summer 2024. Participants reported high satisfaction with group ($M = 44.7$, $SD = 3.4$, on a 0-50 Group Satisfaction scale), a strong working alliance with group facilitators (Working Alliance Inventory-Short Form: $M = 5.1/7$, $SD = 0.8$), and experienced significant pre-post reductions in hopelessness (Beck Hopelessness Scale: $t_{(13)} = 2.16$, $p \leq 0.05$) and anxiety (Geriatric Anxiety Scale: $t_{(13)} = 2.18$, $p \leq 0.05$). Improvements in other negative psychological factors and in psychological well-being have not yet reached statistical significance.

Conclusions: Preliminary findings suggest potential benefit in OMG in promoting social connection and reducing psychological distress among older adults experiencing social isolation and/or psychological distress. These and other findings will be discussed in the context of the need for accessible psychological interventions and the importance of promoting meaning in life to enhance psychological well-being among older adults.