

Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology 17
Series Editor: Antonella Delle Fave

Sophie Leontopoulou
Antonella Delle Fave *Editors*

Emerging Adulthood in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Crises: Individual and Relational Resources

 Springer

Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology

Volume 17

Series Editor

Antonella Delle Fave , University of Milano, Milano, Italy


The aim of the Cross Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology book series is to spread a universal and culture-fair perspective on good life promotion. The series will advance a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural differences in well-being conceptualization. A deeper understanding can affect psychological theories, interventions and social policies in various domains, from health to education, from work to leisure. Books in the series will investigate such issues as enhanced mobility of people across nations, ethnic conflicts and the challenges faced by traditional communities due to the pervasive spreading of modernization trends. New instruments and models will be proposed to identify the crucial components of well-being in the process of acculturation. This series will also explore dimensions and components of happiness that are currently overlooked because happiness research is grounded in the Western tradition, and these dimensions do not belong to the Western cultural frame of mind and values.


Sophie Leontopoulou • Antonella Delle Fave
Editors

Emerging Adulthood in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Crises: Individual and Relational Resources

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ISSN 2210-5417

ISSN 2210-5425 (electronic)

Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology

ISBN 978-3-031-22287-0

ISBN 978-3-031-22288-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22288-7>

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*To my sister Stella, bright star, embodiment
of positivity and resilience.*

Sophie Leontopoulou

*To the memory of my parents Guido
and Giuseppina, daily models of resilient
navigation through life challenges.*

Antonella Delle Fave

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Sophie Leontopoulou and Antonella Delle Fave

Abstract The theory of emerging adulthood, as proposed by Arnett (2000, 2004) sought to describe an extended period of development between adolescence and young adulthood covering the ages between 18 and 29. Significant social changes affecting young people since the 1960s led to the creation of this new period of the life course, including prolongation of studies, that led to a delay in the assumption of adult roles; increased access of women to higher education and career opportunities outside the family; and greater tolerance of premarital sexuality and cohabitation. Arnett (2004) delineated five distinct features of emerging adulthood, including identity exploration, instability, focus on the self, feeling in-between adolescence and young adulthood, and possibilities. He also described criteria for adulthood, primarily accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. The new conceptualization rapidly gathered momentum, and empirical evidence from different countries gradually accumulated, together with practical applications and interventions. Meanwhile, global and local crises emerged, which impacted on emerging adults' experience, development and goals in unprecedented ways. This book represents an attempt to explore positive and negative dimensions of well-being among emerging adults from different world regions under challenging conditions, through empirical evidence collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Greek economic crisis, and to identify individual and relational resources that may foster their positive development in different contexts.

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S. Leontopoulou, A. Delle Fave (eds.), *Emerging Adulthood in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Crises: Individual and Relational Resources*, Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology 17,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22288-7_1

The theory of emerging adulthood, as proposed by Arnett (2000, 2004), sought to describe an extended period of development between adolescence and young adulthood covering the ages between 18 and 29. It is a culturally embedded theory, in that emerging adulthood is primarily observed in industrialized societies, even though it is more recently and steadily growing in developing countries (Tanner & Arnett, 2016). Significant social changes affecting young people since the 1960s led to the creation of this new period of the life course. These included prolongation of studies, and consequently, delay in the assumption of adult roles, including career, marriage, and parenthood; increased access of women to higher education and career opportunities outside the family; and greater tolerance of premarital sexuality and cohabitation. Arnett (2004) delineated five distinct features of emerging adulthood, including identity exploration, instability, focus on the self, feeling in-between adolescence and young adulthood, and possibilities. He also described criteria for adulthood, primarily accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.

The new conceptualization rapidly gathered momentum, and empirical evidence from different countries gradually accumulated, together with practical applications and interventions, targeted to the specific needs and challenges of emerging adults, and aimed at promoting youth's positive development and well-being. Meanwhile, global and local crises emerged, which impacted on emerging adults' experience, development, and goals in unprecedented ways.

This book represents an attempt to explore positive and negative dimensions of well-being among emerging adults under challenging conditions, through empirical evidence collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Greek economic crisis, and to identify individual and relational resources that may foster their positive development in different contexts. In the effort to achieve adequate depth and breadth by presenting relevant, novel, and pertinent scientific evidence, researchers from different world regions were invited to contribute to the book, leading to the inclusion of 18 chapters, divided into three sections and briefly introduced here.

Part I presents some overarching theoretical perspectives and international explorations of challenges and resources of emerging adulthood during times of crisis.

Bronk in Chap. 2 provides an overview of theories and models of purpose in life, a crucial dimension in human development. The chapter synthesizes research across different disciplines to argue that emerging adults are motivated to pursue purposes during trying times, despite enhanced challenges. Both the literature exploring the benefits of leading a life of purpose, as well as the related empirical evidence are discussed, focusing on the environmental and personal features that enable individuals to pursue purposes amidst hardship. The final section offers suggestions for helping young people around the world lead lives of purpose, especially during trying times.

Taking as an example the recent severe and prolonged Greek crisis, in Chap. 3 Chalari provides an overview of the concept of crisis and how it can be understood and shaped by emerging adults through collective meaning making of fear, unsettlement, and lived experiences. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the potential relevance of studying the uniqueness of the prolonged Greek crisis to develop

strategies for supporting emerging adults' well-being in other problematic socio-economic contexts.

In Chap. 4 Giotsa provides an international overview of emerging adults' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on their interpersonal relationships with parents and with partners in romantic relationships. Changes and conflicts related to the social distancing measures are highlighted, including lack of communication and intimacy, as well as emotional detachment within families and within romantic relationships. Positive aspects and resources, such as sharing emotions, pursuing purpose and taking proactive care of others' needs are also highlighted.

Part II primarily includes empirical evidence collected across countries about the daily lives and experiences of emerging adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as one study conducted during the Greek economic crisis. The chapters address both positive and negative dimensions of emerging adults' patterns of adjustment to the crisis-related challenges.

Adopting a mixed-method approach, in Chap. 5 Sanzò, Borgonovo, Bernardelli, and Delle Fave explore mental health levels and qualitative descriptions of perceived challenges and opportunities for well-being among Italian University students during the first lockdown phase of the pandemic. Over 90% of the participants were classified as moderately mentally healthy or flourishing. Distance learning activities and interpersonal relations emerged as key resources in helping participants structure their time budget and adaptively cope with the pandemic-related challenges. The competences deemed as most relevant to face the pandemic situation were adaptive coping strategies, optimism, hardiness, and resilience.

In Chap. 6 Karakasidou, Raftopoulou, Papadimitriou, Pezirkianidis, and Stalikas report findings obtained during the COVID-19 pandemic from Greek University students. Overall, participant reported moderate to high levels of well-being in its different facets, as well as low to moderate levels of negative emotions. Perceived satisfaction with distance learning emerged as a relevant resource, associated with most well-being indicators.

Wilson Fadiji, Chigeza, and Shoko in Chap. 7 provide results of a qualitative study conducted among South African University students, exploring the role of meaning making and its relations with well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown. The prominent themes in participants' reports were the re-emergence of value systems, a renewed sense of connectedness, self-extension, or otherness, the acquisition of new skills and accomplishments, and the development of inner strength and growth. The dynamics between self-care and caring for others lies at the core of these emerging adults' meaning making process, promoting their well-being under inherently disempowering circumstances.

In Chap. 8 Chan, Fang, Cheung, Luk, Leung, and Chen provide findings from a study involving Chinese emerging adults, to investigate the interplay of growth mindset and self-compassion in their relationship with resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both growth mindset and self-compassion emerged as significant though independent predictors of resilience. In particular, among the components of self-compassion, self-kindness, and mindfulness were specifically and

positively related to resilience levels. Moreover, the interaction between growth mindset and the self-compassion component of common humanity (which refers to the understanding of life hardships as shared human experiences) positively predicted resilience. The discussion of these findings is framed in a culture-sensitive perspective.

Chapter 9 features an empirical investigation of the positive and negative dimensions of well-being among emerging adults in Mexico, during the COVID-19 pandemic. González-Arratia López-Fuentes and Torres Muñoz explore the relationship of self-efficacy and stress perception with resilience and happiness, taking into account the potential role of age and comparing self-efficacy, happiness and stress values across groups of participants with different resilience levels. Overall, and in line with international evidence, positive relationships were observed between self-efficacy, resilience, and happiness, while negative ones with perceived stress.

In Chap. 10 Papastylianou and Zerva investigate the role of resilience, loneliness, and perceived parental rearing behaviors as predictors of life satisfaction among Greek University students during COVID-19 pandemic. Both resilience and loneliness were significantly associated with participants' life satisfaction, positively the former and negatively the latter, whereas perceived parental rearing behaviors did not emerge as a significant predictor in the final model. Moreover, neither gender nor residing with parents during quarantine significantly predicted life satisfaction.

Scharf, Enav and Scharf in Chap. 11 use a mixed-method approach to investigate romantic relationships of Arab emerging adults living in Israel during the pandemic. They found that despite pandemic-related restrictions created difficulties for becoming acquainted and dating in public places, they also propelled creativity and the use of other forms of communication to attain and preserve closeness and intimacy. Participants with higher levels of meaning and a growth belief regarding relationships, as well as lower levels of other-perfectionism attributed higher importance to romantic relationships. Additionally, parental models of relational intimacy were positively associated with a growth view of relationships and higher levels of perceived meaning in life.

In Chap. 12 Leontopoulou and Chletsos investigate perceived hope among University students during the Greek socio-economic crisis, in relation to family and individual economic conditions, recollected parental involvement in participants' school activities, and perceived parental hope. The findings suggested that personal and family income were strongly associated with emerging adults' experience of the severity of the crisis. This in turn was mirrored on levels of youths' hope, in addition to their perceptions of parental hope. Higher recollected parental school involvement seemed to contribute to emerging adults' hope even under crisis.

The third section of the book deals with students' experience of academic activities during the pandemic, and with University-based interventions designed to support emerging adults' psychosocial resources.

Asanjarani in Chap. 13 reports on academic well-being and engagement among emerging adults during the pandemic period, specifically focusing on the issues raised by the necessity to move all teaching activities to online platforms. Moving from an analysis of the different aspects of online learning, including its

shortcomings and challenges for teachers and students, the author invites psychologists and educators to design interventions for promoting well-being, healthy academic engagement, motivation and purpose in the learning process of emerging adults.

In Chap. 14 Shernoff presents an example of game-based learning, suggesting its potential for promoting flow and deep learning among University students in times of crisis, considering that lack of concentration and engagement were identified as relevant barriers to learning during the pandemic. A 3-year quasi experimental study involving US emerging adults who took an undergraduate engineering course was implemented to compare a video game learning approach to a traditional one. Students taking the game-based course reported higher intrinsic motivation, work-play integration, engagement, as well as better performance on tests of complex course concepts designed to measure deep learning. In light of the current spreading of online academic activities across countries, these findings can represent useful suggestions to improve the quality of learning in Universities.

Chapter 15 hosts a mixed-method study designed to investigate the role of music in undergraduate students' well-being during the COVID-19 lockdown. Chrysostomou, Triantafyllaki, Anagnostopoulou, and Zioga assessed students' musical training, well-being and the use of music for mood regulation. A positive relationship was detected between perception of the beneficial role of music for well-being, and well-being scores. Three groups of participants were then identified based on their well-being and musical training levels. Qualitative results highlighted that students with higher musical training and students with higher well-being levels (regardless of training) used music in more diverse ways compared to those with low musical training or low well-being levels, who primarily used music for emotional discharge.

Chapter 16 focuses on empowering Brazilian emerging adults to face the post-COVID-19 challenges. Araujo, Pinheiro, Arantes, and Pereira explored how collaborative work may support graduate and undergraduate students in building purpose and well-being in their lives and in the lives of others. An educational process is described in which active learning techniques, hybrid learning, and technology tools were used to invite students in small working groups to face and solve real problems occurring in their social environment, and to design interventions to be implemented in the community. The learning strategies and emergent solution prototypes can represent examples to be adapted to other contexts, with the aim of empowering emerging adults to deal with difficulties and crises.

In Chap. 17 Karampas, Pezirkianidis, and Stalikas present a novel internet-delivered intervention for emerging adults developed during the pandemic that combines stress mindset training with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Greek University students were randomly assigned to a five-week intervention and a control group. Participants in the intervention group reported a higher "stress-is-enhancing" mindset and a lower "stress-is-debilitating" mindset. Considering the contribution of stress mindset to both the level of perceived stress and the related coping strategies, these findings bear useful suggestions for designing interventions

aimed at fostering emergent adults' mental health and performance under stressful circumstances.

Chapter 18 by Reynolds reports on a program aimed at building resilience for emerging adult pre-service students in teaching and librarianship. Instructional guidelines for designing culturally responsive resilience coursework, knowledge-building, and practice opportunities for emerging adults in these fields are described. Curriculum guidelines refer to both formal higher educational offerings, and practice-based wellness classes in resilience building, mindfulness and compassion training.

Having described the purpose of this book and outlined all chapter contributions that inform and shape it, we hope that its appeal for a wide array of readers—researchers and students in different fields, practitioners, counsellors, and trainers, as well as the general public—can be glimpsed. The volume includes novel quantitative and qualitative research, interventions studies, as well as critical reviews and conceptual papers. In bringing together such a diverse group of scholars, who collected evidence from a wide range of countries across continents, our aim was to provide a broad and deep understanding of emerging adults' mobilization and exploitation of personal and relational resources in facing life challenges, focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and the Greek economic crisis as exemplary critical conditions. In today's turbulent and unstable societal and world context, the theme of successful adaptation to problematic circumstances is highly relevant to professionals and researchers in psychology, developmental science, education, sociology, economics, and the clinical fields of crisis/trauma and counselling. We, therefore, hope that this book may represent both a useful reading, and a starting point for further advancements in the study of the challenges and resources faced by emerging adults worldwide.

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Part I
On Crises, Emerging Adults,
and Well-being

Chapter 2

Discovering and Pursuing Purpose in Trying Times



Kendall Cotton Bronk

Abstract Over the past twenty years, research on purpose has increased dramatically, and this growing body of research consistently points to a myriad of physical, psychological, social, and even academic benefits associated with leading a life of purpose, especially among emerging adults. However, much of this research has focused on young people amidst times of relative calm and tranquility. What does the pursuit of purpose look like among young people amidst times of turbulence? Are young people likely to pursue lives of purpose during challenging times, and if so, what does this look like? What does it entail? In addition to offering a definition of purpose, the present chapter synthesizes research across different disciplines to argue that emerging adults are motivated to pursue purposes during trying times, despite the enhanced challenges associated with doing so. More specifically, this chapter outlines a conceptualization of purpose used regularly in research on the topic, references literature on the benefits of leading a life of purpose—especially during challenging times—and reviews relevant empirical research on the external supports and internal characteristics that enable individuals to pursue purposes amidst hardship. Implications for helping young people around the world lead lives of purpose, especially during trying times, are also addressed.

Keywords Purpose in life · Emerging adulthood · Positive youth development

Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.
– Viktor E. Frankl

Viktor Emile Frankl was born on March 26, 1905, on the top floor of his family's home in Vienna Austria, to parents who were Jewish civil servants (Viktor Frankl Institute, 2021). By all accounts he was a bright, inquisitive child, who was both

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deeply emotional and also deeply rational. Those who knew him say he had a terrific sense of humor. As early as high school, he took an interest in psychology, and as a young adult, he worked as a Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna. In these roles, he began writing a book about purpose and its critical role in human survival. This book would become his life's work.

At the age of 36, he met and married the love of his life, Tilly Grosser. It was 1941. Just a few months later, the couple learned they were expecting their first child. They were overjoyed. However, only a few months after this, with World War II in underway, the couple was arrested by the Nazis. Tilly was forced to abort their child, and the Nazis seized and destroyed Frankl's manuscript, his book on the importance of purpose. Viktor and Tilly were imprisoned in Auschwitz. Viktor remained at the camp for several months, but Tilly was quickly moved to another camp, Bergen Belsen. Sadly—tragically—she died at Bergen Belsen, at the age of 24.

Unaware of his wife's fate, Frankl spent the next nearly three years in four different concentration camp. He used the time to study people, and what he learned confirmed what he had long suspected: people can withstand a lot if they have a reason to live.

A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' for his existence and will be able to bear almost any 'how.' (Frankl, 1946, p. 101)

While in the camps, Frankl used his knowledge of the power of purpose to keep himself going. When he came down with Typhoid fever, he started re-writing his manuscript on scraps of paper he found and stole. Writing helped sustain him. Finishing his book and returning to care for his wife— he did not know that she had died— provided him with a reason to live.

On April 27, 1945, the final camp Frankl was in was liberated by the Americans, and Frankl was freed. Upon being released from the concentration camp, Frankl was finally able to pen and publish his book on purpose. He wrote the book in only 9 days, having thought it through so carefully while a prisoner. *Man's Search for Meaning* was published in Austria in 1946, and since then, it has been translated into 24 languages and sold more than 10 million copies. Frankl's life's work offers an inspiring example of someone who pursued purpose in incredibly trying times.

Today, we find ourselves living in challenging times, although, thankfully, for most people anyway, the challenges we currently confront are not nearly as dire as the ones Frankl confronted. However, we find ourselves beset by economic instability, social and political change, and a serious global pandemic. Accordingly, it is difficult to argue that these are anything other than challenging times. This chapter reviews research that sheds light on the extent to which and the manner in which emerging adults are motivated to and capable of pursuing purpose in times of challenge. In addition, this chapter outlines empirically based strategies adults can employ to support young people pursuing purpose amidst difficult circumstances.

2.1 Purpose Defined

Before diving into the ways that purpose may help emerging adults navigate challenging circumstances, it is important to offer a clear definition of the construct. In his book, Frankl uses *purpose* and *meaning* interchangeably, but to conduct scientific research on these constructs, it is necessary to clearly differentiate them. To that end, and to honor Frankl's conceptualization of purpose, my colleagues and I proposed a definition that has been regularly used in research. *A purpose in life refers to an active commitment to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and motivated by a desire to contribute to the world beyond the self* (Damon et al., 2003). This definition has three important dimensions. First, a purpose is an active commitment. This means that a purpose is not something individuals merely think or dream about. It is something they act on. Something they *do*. Second, purpose is a prospective construct (Bronk & Mitchell, 2021). It represents a forward-looking, far-horizon commitment to act. As a goal of sorts, it represents a stable and enduring aim that provides an orienting sense of direction. Third, in addition to being meaningful to the self, a purpose in life is also of consequence to the world beyond the self. Purposes are inspired by a desire to contribute to the broader world in personally meaningful ways. Based on this definition, research suggests emerging adults find purpose in a wide range of activities, including in serving God, volunteering in their communities, caring for their families, creating new works of art, advancing political and social change, and pursuing careers that enable them to make a personally meaningful difference in the broader world (Baumsteiger et al., in press, 2022; Damon, 2008).

Importantly, this definition also differentiates purpose from meaning. According to Baumeister (1991), meaning encompasses values, efficacy, self-worth, and purpose. Others have noted that meaning is comprised of coherence, significance, and purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). Although these definitions vary, they share a perspective that views purpose as a dimension or instantiation of meaning. Accordingly, individuals can find meaning in any experience that makes their lives feel more significant, but they can only find purpose in those experiences that are also goal-oriented in nature and motivated by a desire to make a difference in the broader world (Bronk & Mitchell, in press). This means that whereas taking a walk in the woods might make one's life feel meaningful, working to preserve the environment might instead fill one's life with purpose.

Based on this conceptualization, individuals may begin the search for purpose in adolescence, but it is often not until they reach emerging adulthood—or even later—that they identify a purpose for their lives (Bronk, 2013). By adolescence, individuals have gained the cognitive capacity to engage in the hypothetical-deductive reasoning required to seriously consider how they want to use their skills to contribute to the world beyond themselves (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958).

In addition to being capable of searching for purpose, adolescents and emerging adults also tend to be highly motivated to do so. Purpose formation and identity development go hand-in-hand; as individuals explore who they hope to become (the

identity question), some also consider what it is they hope to accomplish in their lives (the purpose question; Bronk, 2011). In fact, research finds that as individuals explore and commit to identities, they simultaneously explore and commit to purposes (Hill & Burrow, 2012). Purpose formation is related to healthy identity development for heterosexual as well as LGBTQ individuals (Collins et al., 2021). Given the critical role purpose plays in healthy identity formation (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Damon, 2008; Erikson, 1968, 1980) and given that identity development today is typically not resolved until emerging adulthood (Côté & Levine, 2014), purpose is a particularly important construct to consider with regards to emerging adults.

2.2 Purpose and Psychological and Physical Well-being

Frankl argued that leading a life of purpose was crucial to staving off negative psychological states and supporting human survival. Recent empirical research backs up his theoretical claims. For instance, the presence of purpose has been found to be inversely related to loneliness, boredom, and suicide ideation (Bhagchandani, 2017; Dukes & Lorch, 1989; Fahlman et al., 2015; Heisel & Flett, 2004).

However, more recent research on purpose has been concerned with understanding the construct's role, not only in surviving, but also in thriving. Studies have concluded that purpose is correlated with indicators of psychological health, including hope, life satisfaction, and stronger and more abundant social ties (Bronk, 2011; Bronk et al., 2009; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). It has similarly been found to coexist with indicators of physical health, including less chronic pain, better sleep, and greater longevity (Dezutter et al., 2016; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Turner et al., 2017). Although these findings are correlational in nature, epigenetic research suggests that leading a purposeful life may lead to a more healthful genetic expression (Fredrickson et al., 2013), and other research finds that individuals with purpose, as compared to their peers, tend to engage in more health-sustaining behaviors, such as eating well, exercising regularly, and visiting the doctor (Hill et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2014). Consistent with this finding that individuals with purpose tend to take better care of their health, a recent study found that individuals with purpose, compared to individuals who lacked purpose, were more likely to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Hill et al., 2021). Taken together, it seems clear that purpose not only correlates with physical health; it also contributes to it.

2.3 Benefits of Purpose Amidst Crises

In addition to the indicators of physical and psychological health that are likely to benefit all emerging adults, purpose is also associated with some indicators of well-being that are particularly likely to help young people weather challenging

circumstances (Pfund et al., 2020a). For instance, several studies have concluded that purpose promotes resilience to stress, which is inescapable during trying times (Bronk et al., 2018; Burrow & Hill, 2013; Gutowski et al., 2017). Purpose has been found to help emerging adults navigate the stress associated with trying to find work amidst the Great Recession and with managing the stress associated with being diagnosed with cancer (Bronk et al., 2018; Bronk et al., in press, 2022). In fact, researchers point to purpose as a critical resource for the development of resilience, or the ability to bounce back from stress and challenge (Smith et al., 2012). Relatedly, purpose has also been linked to both lower levels of daily distress and anxiety (Kiang, 2012). Although it is unclear what the mechanism is for these relationships, it seems likely that having a larger aim toward which to orient oneself provides a meaningful reason to keep going, despite obstacles, hardships, and setbacks.

Another way that purpose is likely to benefit emerging adults during times of challenge may have to do with the way purposeful emerging adults view obstacles in their paths. A creative study featured college students standing before a large hill in the middle of campus (Burrow et al., 2015). Half of the students were primed to reflect on their favorite movie, and the other half was primed to reflect on their purpose in life. Compared to the students primed to think about their favorite movie, students primed to think about their purpose estimated that the hill was steeper, but at the same time, they also reported that they were better prepared to climb it. In other words, in a purposeful mindset, emerging adults tended to view challenges—not as less significant—but as less overwhelming, less daunting, and more surmountable. The ability to view challenges as surmountable is an important capacity during difficult times.

Another study—a daily diary study—(Hill et al., 2018) similarly concluded that on days when stressful events occurred, individuals with purpose, compared to individuals who lacked purpose, reported greater positive affect, less negative affect, and fewer physical symptoms. In short, daily stressors do not seem to affect individuals with purpose as negatively as they affect individuals who lack purpose.

Related to the ability to manage challenge, purpose has also been found to contribute to the development of grit, or a sense of passion and persistence for one's goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Over the course of a semester, college students with purpose were more likely than college students who lacked purpose to develop grit (Hill et al., 2016). This relationship did not hold in the other direction, meaning that gritty individuals were not particularly likely to develop purpose. This suggests that once individuals know what it is they hope to accomplish in their lives, they are likely to persevere and make progress toward it.

Finally, coping represents yet one more way that purpose is likely to benefit emerging adults confronting challenging times. Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage internal and external demands, regulate stressful emotions, and modify distressing circumstances (Ishida & Okada, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and research finds that purposeful individuals tend to utilize more adaptive coping strategies (Stoyles et al., 2015). When individuals perceive stressors to be more manageable or more controllable—which is often the case

among more purposeful individuals (Burrow et al., 2015)—they are likely to employ effective problem-focused coping strategies to tackle them. Coping effectively is another important skill for navigating difficult times. Taken together, leading a life of purpose is likely to benefit emerging adults under most circumstances, but it appears to be particularly important for emerging adults facing hardships.

2.4 Leading a Life of Purpose Is Difficult in Difficult Times

Having established what a purpose is and why it is beneficial to emerging adults, it seems relevant to turn to research that explores what purposes look like among emerging adults facing trying times. Research, and perhaps common sense, suggests it is more difficult to discover and pursue purposes during challenging circumstances. To explain why this may be the case, it makes sense to reference Maslow's (1943) well-known hierarchy of needs. This theory suggests that the life-sustaining requirement of securing basic needs—such as personal safety, food, and shelter—may supplant the need to focus on self-actualizing aims, such as searching for a purpose in life.

Some recent empirical research supports this theoretical argument. For instance, individuals in dire circumstances may not anticipate long, positive, or predictable futures for themselves, and as a result, they may be less likely to orient to the future, which is required for purpose development (DuRant et al., 1994, 1995; Schmidt et al., 2016). A study of undocumented migrants who came to the USA as children found that as adolescents and emerging adults these young people struggled to envision their lives in the future, largely because of their uncertain immigration status, and this adversely impacted their ability to develop a purpose in life (Gonzalez et al., 2013). In this way, challenging circumstances appear to encourage individuals to focus on the here and now at the expense of focusing on the long term, which can hinder purpose development.

Not only can challenging circumstances make it more difficult for individuals to focus on the long term, but they can also make it more difficult to act in purposeful ways. A handful of studies have concluded that the presence of purpose is inversely related to the stress and anxiety associated with challenging circumstances (e.g., Bigler et al., 2001; Gutowski et al., 2017; Pinquart, 2002). It seems likely that stressful situations dominate thinking in a way that minimizes the planful thought and meaningful action associated with leading a life of purpose.

Finally, it is also the case that emerging adults confronting hardships may encounter real or perceived barriers to the pursuit of purpose. Individuals who find purpose in reporting the news, for instance, may struggle to access education and internships required to pursue their purposeful, professional path. In each of these ways and others, leading a life of purpose is made more difficult by challenging circumstances and in difficult contexts.

2.5 Internal Characteristics and External Supports

However, pursuing purpose amidst hardship is not impossible. In fact, a handful of recent studies of purpose among emerging adults facing challenges concluded that hardships that might otherwise curtail the development of purpose, can catalyze it, at least under certain circumstances. For instance, a mixed methods study, designed to explore the purpose-development process among ethnic minority youth living in low-income communities, first identified the challenges confronting youth (Bronk et al., 2020). Youth talked about hardships associated with poverty, discrimination, immigration status, and health problems. These difficulties could have stymied their pursuit of purpose. However, they did not, at least not under some circumstances. When the young people had access to social supports—such as parents, peer groups, mentors, or institutional supports, such as church groups or extracurricular organizations—that could help them find meaning in addressing these challenges, then the challenges—rather than curtailing the pursuit of purpose—catalyzed it. As an example, a Latina talked about the discrimination she suffered both as a woman and as first-generation immigrant from Mexico. Not surprisingly, she found this treatment very demoralizing. However, she discovered a number of young people who, like her, had experienced racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, but they were taking action to improve their circumstances. Once she met this group, she became inspired to do the same. In her interview, she reported that she had applied to college, where she planned to study pre-law. She wanted to become a lawyer and follow in the then Senator Kamala Harris’ footsteps to become a politician and fight for social change. In this way, she—like many of the other young people from low-income communities—encountered a personal hardship that in the presence of social support served to inspire the pursuit of purpose.

Other studies have come to similar conclusions. For instance, researchers concluded that ethnic minority youth often discover purposes in the hardships they experience straddling two cultures, the dominant culture and their ethnic minority culture (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), and another study determined that familial support, including emotional, cognitive, and monetary support, was critical to purpose development (Moran et al., 2012).

Yet another study similarly concluded that hardships in the presence of support could inspire purpose. This study was conducted with young people of color living in urban, low-income communities (Gutowski et al., 2017) who reported facing many challenges, including financial, family, academic, vocational, peer, neighborhood, relocation, and immigration-related stressors. These hardships acted as barriers to purpose to the extent that they made it more difficult for young people to imagine themselves realizing their most personally significant aims. In some cases, these challenges became so significant that they eclipsed young people’s ability to focus on the pursuit of purpose altogether. However, these same challenges motivated young people to pursue purposes when they reported having adults in their lives who had high expectations for them. These supportive adults motivated

purpose to the extent that they inspired youth to take action to escape the contextual stressors that threatened to hold them back.

Another study conducted with adolescent and young adult cancer survivors concluded that being diagnosed with cancer led young people to reflect more seriously on their purposes in life (Bronk et al., in press, 2022). In some cases, this meant recommitting to an earlier purpose in life, in other cases, it meant committing to a search for purpose, and in still other cases, it meant committing to an entirely new purpose in life. It is noteworthy that studies relying on different samples of young people exposed to different kinds of hardships, consistently conclude that hardships can spur purpose development, especially in the presence of social support.

This finding is further underscored by both theoretical and empirical studies that point to a reactive pathway to purpose development (Gutowski et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2014; Pfund et al., 2020b). In reactive paths to purpose, individuals are inspired to lead lives of purpose following significant life events, including negative or difficult life events (Liang et al., 2017). In sum, the evidence clearly suggests that challenges in the presence of supports can serve to inspire the development of purpose.

Given that challenge *can* spur the development of purpose, it is important to explore for whom and under what circumstances this is likely to be the case. Research suggests certain internal characteristics, including hope and optimism, may be particularly important for supporting purpose formation amidst challenge. In empirical research on the construct, hope is often conceptualized as a belief that individuals know how to reach their goals (Pathways) and that they have the motivation to use those pathways to do so (Agency; Snyder et al., 2005). In other words, hope involves having *the will* (“Agency”) and knowing *the way* (“Pathways”) to reach a desired outcome. Optimism, on the other hand, refers to the generalized expectation of positive versus negative outcomes in important life domains (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

A recent study concluded that hope and optimism were important characteristics for the pursuit of purpose during challenging times. This study examined purpose among emerging adults on the brink of entering the work world in Greece during the Great Recession (Bronk et al., 2018). As recently as 2016, the effects of the Great Recession were in full effect in Greece. The country was suffering a serious financial crisis. Its debt had ballooned, and as a result, leaders implemented severe austerity measures, including raising taxes, cutting pensions, and limiting the amount of money people could withdraw from the bank at any one time. At the same time, the country was also dealing with a refugee crisis. Refugees from Syria and other parts of the Middle East were streaming into Greece, and the rest of the European Union countries had closed their borders to them. Refugees were stranded in Greece. Against this backdrop, researchers conducted a mixed methods study designed to gain insight into the role economic and political instability played in emerging adults’ views of the future and their purposes in life (Bronk et al., 2018).

Survey results suggested that emerging adults with high purpose scores—as compared to emerging adults with low purpose scores—were resilient enough to

look past the present challenges and envision a positive future. More specifically, purpose was significantly, positively correlated with hope, optimism, positive future expectations, and resilience. This research is underscored by other studies that similarly find that hope and optimism are internal characteristics that often appear in conjunction with the development of purpose (Conversano et al., 2010; Scheier & Carver, 1985).

In addition to hope and optimism, agency and a sense of responsibility represent two other internal characteristics that appear to support purpose development amidst hardship. Agency refers to the sense that people control their own actions and—through them—can have an impact on the broader world (Moretto et al., 2011). When a sense of agency allows people to choose between right and wrong actions, it has implications for moral responsibility (Moretto et al., 2011). Individuals need to feel agentic enough to take purposeful action, and a recent study revealed that emerging adults pursuing lives of purpose during challenging times pointed to a strong sense of responsibility for their families, communities, and even their country as a reason to stay committed to their purposeful aims, despite the hardships they were encountering (Bronk et al., 2018). Purposeful emerging adults said things like, “It’s the only way we can move forward, by looking out for all of us, not just ourselves” (pg. 8). Feeling responsible not only for themselves but also for the other people in their lives gave emerging adults the motivation they needed to persevere in pursuit of their purposes.

In addition to internal characteristics, external supports are also critical to the pursuit of purpose, especially in trying times. As noted above, peers and adults can encourage the development of purpose by helping young people find meaning in addressing the challenges that confront them (Bronk et al., 2020). Another study that came to a similar conclusion examined the effects of trauma on purpose formation (Pfund et al., 2020b). Using the Hawaii Longitudinal Study of Personality and Health, this study featured adult participants who retrospectively reported on three kinds of trauma—non-betrayal trauma, such as trauma caused by enduring a natural disaster; low-betrayal trauma, such as trauma caused by a stranger; and high-betrayal trauma, such as trauma caused by abuse by a family member or relative. Overall, adolescent trauma scores were unrelated to a sense of purpose in adulthood. This means that regardless of whether young people experienced trauma, they were equally as likely to go on to lead lives of purpose. However, there was a caveat to this conclusion. The study was conducted in Hawaii, and for Japanese Americans, one of the largest cultural groups in the study, there was a negative association between adolescent betrayal trauma and adult purpose. Although experiencing betrayal trauma during adolescence did not make other individuals more or less likely to go on to lead lives of purpose, it made Japanese Americans less likely to lead of purpose in adulthood. The study design did not allow researchers to investigate exactly why this might be the case, but they noticed that other social groups, especially Native Hawaiians, reported greater family support than the Japanese Americans. It seems plausible that family support enhanced the other groups’ ability to display resilience and develop purpose, despite the trauma they experienced. Considering the findings of this study alongside studies with similar conclusions

suggests that social support is essential to the pursuit of purpose during trying times (Bronk et al., 2020; Gutowski et al., 2017; Moran et al., 2012).

Empowering young people to act in meaningful ways is yet another way to support the development of purpose amidst challenge. In the broadest sense, youth empowerment refers to a process whereby young people are encouraged to take charge of their lives by taking action to improve access to resources and transform their circumstances (Ledford & Lucas, 2013). Supportive adults and mentors can help young people find meaning in the hardships they confront by empowering them to act to address those hardships. Rather than feeling like victims of injustice or hardship, young people can feel empowered to take action (Bronk et al., 2020).

2.6 Implications for Supporting Purpose among Emerging Adults in Crisis

The research reviewed thus far points to several practical strategies that individuals—parents, teachers, mentors, and others—committed to supporting emerging adults during challenging times—can employ to help young people cultivate and pursue purpose. The first thing to keep in mind is that challenging circumstances, such as the ones we are living amidst, do appear to make the pursuit of purpose more difficult. As a result, it is important to practice patience and to have realistic expectations for emerging adults trying to lead lives of purpose as they confront difficult contexts and challenging circumstances.

To increase the likelihood that emerging adults will derive the benefits of purpose, even during hard times, research suggests they require consistent and enduring support from valued individuals and groups in their lives. This is not a surprising or a counter-intuitive implication, but it is a consistent conclusion. Older adults can play a critical role in helping emerging adults reframe challenges as opportunities for meaningful action (Bronk et al., 2020; Gutowski et al., 2017). They can provide encouragement to take action and provide much-needed support when setbacks occur. They can also provide practical support, including resources and financial assistance, that free the young person to focus on pursuing personally meaningful commitments, including purposes (Moran et al., 2012).

Next, research reviewed to this point consistently points to hope as an internal characteristic critical to the development of purpose. When young people lose hope in a brighter future, the pursuit of purpose becomes nearly impossible, but as long as emerging adults can look past the challenging circumstances before them and imagine a more hopeful future, purpose is possible. This finding holds for young people navigating economic and political instability (Bronk et al., 2018) and young people navigating cancer (Wnuk et al., 2012). The ability to envision a hopeful future appears to be critical to the development and pursuit of purpose at any time, but especially amidst challenging times, when hope may be in short supply (Bronk et al., 2009; Stoyles et al., 2015).

Finally, youth need to feel empowered to act. Helping emerging adults reframe the hardships they encounter as opportunities for action can arm them with the motivation they need. Empowering young people to act is also an important way of restoring the hope (Ginwright, 2010).

2.7 Discussion

This chapter set out to review the growing body of research on purpose among emerging adults confronting trying times. A comprehensive review reveals that emerging adults are likely to find it more difficult to lead lives of purpose when confronted by hardship (Bigler et al., 2001; DuRant et al., 1994, 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2013; Gutowski et al., 2017; Pinquart, 2002; Schmidt et al., 2016). However, they do not find it impossible (Bronk et al., 2020). In fact, some find inspiration for purpose in the very hardships they face. In the presence of social support, hardships can serve to inspire the development of purpose (Bronk et al., 2020; Gutowski et al., 2017; Moran et al., 2012). Emerging adults are more likely to lead lives of purpose during trying times when they have access to external assets, including individuals and groups who can help them find meaning in the challenges confronting them and empower them to take action (Bronk et al., 2020). In addition, youth with particular internal characteristics, including hope, optimism, agency, and a sense of moral responsibility (Bronk et al., 2018; Scheier & Carver, 1985), are particularly likely to lead lives of purpose despite challenging circumstances.

At the same time as we work to support emerging adults' pursuit of purpose, we also need to work to improve the circumstances challenging them. It is important to keep in mind that although young people are resilient, they are not invulnerable. At some point hardships, especially in the form of pervasive discrimination, ongoing trauma, or other similarly long-term and intense adversities, are likely to overwhelm young people and their pursuit of purpose (Gutowski et al., 2017). To that end, we—as adults concerned about emerging adult well-being—need to work not only to help young people weather challenging circumstances and contexts, but also to address the circumstances and contexts that challenge their positive development. Failure to do so puts an undue burden on young people.

Leading a life of purpose during trying times not only supports survival, as Frankl (1959) argued, but it also appears to support thriving, as evidenced by the growing body of purpose research. Emerging adults who manage to lead lives of purpose are likely to be buffered from many of the potentially negative effects of challenging circumstances. They are also likely to better navigate difficult contexts as they view hardships as surmountable, manage negativity, persevere with grit, cope effectively, connect to something larger than themselves, find the motivation to keep going, and feel empowered to combat the systematic injustices often associated with challenging circumstances (Bronk et al., 2018; Burrow et al., 2015; Burrow & Hill, 2013; Gutowski et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2016; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Stoyles et al., 2015; Sumner et al., 2018). Consequently, it is critical to foster the internal