

The role of meaning in life in prevention of suicidal ideations

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ABSTRACT

Suicide is a major public health concern worldwide and its rates are alarming very high. In North-eastern part of India, Meghalaya ranks third in suicide death rates and more deaths are of youths, which makes it today's epidemic. Research has shown that the presence of meaning in life is positively associated with happiness and well-being and the absence of meaning in life is linked with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the role of meaning in life in prevention of suicidal ideations among the college and university going students (N=90) at Shillong, Meghalaya between the age range of 18-24 years. The exploratory research design, and both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Meaning in life questionnaire and suicidal behaviour questionnaire revised were distributed to 90 students by simple random sampling and 20 samples were selected by purposive sampling for the in-depth interview. The results showed that suicidal ideations were common and some of the reasons were: family pressure and difficulty reaching family expectations; mental, physical health illness; and romantic relationship issues.

Keywords: *Meaning in Life, Suicidal Ideations, Youths*

College students face a barrage of challenges in their daily life. Aside from doing their homework, projects and extra-curricular activities, they also have responsibilities at home as a son or daughter, brother or sister and as a friend. College students are mostly youths, which is an important period in the lifespan of humans. During this period, they face different changes and experiences which can have both negative and positive impact on their lives. The challenges which the youths face can have a lasting impact in their lives. They face challenges such as knowing their own identity, handling relationships, building new roles with parents and in the society and becoming conscious of their role in life (Bahramian & Vaidya, 2019). Many empirical studies have supported that meaning in life is important for college students' psychological, spiritual, academic, vocational, and physical well-being. A sense of higher meaning in life is positively related to life satisfaction and positive affect (Steger and Frazier, 2005). To find meaning and significance in life is innate drive of humans and failure to do so, results in psychological distress (Frankl, 1963). Meaning in life which is an important construct in psychology has been the focus of limited

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research. Researchers has found that meaning in life have a stronger association with positive well-being (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992). According to Allport (1961), one can attain meaning by attaching oneself or one's life to a larger framework of meaning such as religion or a philosophy of life. However, Baumeister (1991), proposes that the experience of meaning in life can be attained by fulfilling: purpose, value, efficacy and self-worth, the four psychological needs. According to Wagani and Colucci (2018), a sense of meaning in life can give people higher levels of psychological and physical well-being and can be particularly important in preventing suicidal behaviour. Less meaning in life has been associated with depression and anxiety (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993) and suicidal ideation and substance abuse (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), as well as other types of distress. The study done by Dogra, Basu & Das (2011) found that the presence of meaning in life is helpful in suicidal ideation. Thus, it is vital to understand the importance of their life purpose and their well-being.

Suicidal ideation is important precursor of suicide attempts (Liu & Mustanki, 2012) and it is a risk factor for suicide-related behaviour, as well as for death by suicide (Heisel & Flett, 2006). Suicide is serious issue in all over the world. Suicidal behaviour is associated with potentially severe mental and physical health outcomes (Dogra, Basu & Das, 2011). According to UN (2018), about 8 lakhs people world-wide commit suicide and it's the second leading cause of death among 15-29 age group, also, it is the top three causes of death of youths and a major threat to other age groups (Pathak, Singh & Singh, 2017). According to the leading newspaper, The Shillong Times (2013); Meghalaya ranks third in suicide among the rest of the Northeastern states of India. Suicide is a concern all over the world, in our country and our state Meghalaya.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

1. Is there a presence of meaning in life among the youths in Shillong?
2. What are the sources of meaning in life?
3. What are the reasons for suicidal ideations among the youths?
4. Does meaning in life help in coping from suicidal ideations among the youths? If yes, then how?

Research objectives

1. To explore the presence of meaning in life among the youths in Shillong.
2. To identify the relationship between meaning in life and suicidal ideation.
3. To identify and list the sources of meaning in life among the youths in Shillong.
4. To identify coping strategy among the youths from suicidal ideation.

Sample

An exploratory study is done with 90 samples in Shillong, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya. Consent was taken before giving the demographic profile and two standardised questionnaires.

Instrument

Two measures were used in this study,

1. Meaning in life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, 2006)
2. Suicidal Behaviour Questionnaire Revised (SBQR; Osman et al., 2001).

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Procedure

90 questionnaires along with demographic profile were distributed to students from different colleges and universities by using simple random sampling and 20 samples that had suicidal ideations were screened out purposively for the in-depth interview. The reliability test was done and coefficient alpha found for MLQ is 0.889 and for SBQ-R is 0.805. Pilot study was done on 3 respondents and final changes were made on the interview guide. The data was analysed using SPSS v23 and six method thematic analyses (Braun & Clark, 2006)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the 90 respondents are as follow:

Age	Ethnicity					Gender		Religion			Educational qualification	
	Khasi	Jaintia	Garos	Hajong	Other	Male	Female	Christian	Hindu	Indigeno us	UG	PG
18	4	2	-	-	-	1	5	6	-	-	5	-
19	5	1	-	-	-	1	5	6	-	-	6	-
20	8	3	2	-	1	2	12	13	-	1	13	-
21	12	6	10	1	-	13	16	23	2	4	24	2
22	7	3	4	-	-	3	11	12	-	2	9	3
23	7	3	2	-	-	6	6	12	-	-	3	7
24	6	-	3	-	-	5	4	8	-	1	3	6
Total %	53.1%	16.2%	18.9%	0.9%	0.9%	27.9%	53.1%	72%	1.8%	7.2%	56.7%	16.2 %

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 90)

Table 1 shows, the demographic characteristics of the 90 individuals both undergraduate and postgraduate that participated in the study conducted at Shillong, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya. The table is a representation of both male and female from the age range of 18-24, from different ethnicity, and religion.

Some of the major findings of the four objectives (viz., to explore the presence of meaning in life among the youths in Shillong, to identify the relationship between meaning in life and suicidal ideations, to identify and list the sources of meaning in life among the youths in Shillong and to identify coping strategy among the youths from suicidal ideations) are as follow:

Low presence of meaning in life	68.4%
High presence of meaning in life	12.6%

Table 2. Table showing the percentage of presence of meaning in life (N=90)

Low suicidal ideations	19.8%
High suicidal ideations	61.2%

Table 3. Table showing the percentage of suicidal ideations (N=90)

There is a negative correlation found between meaning in life and suicidal ideations (Pearson's coefficient -0.156) which shows that less presence of meaning in life is the reason for high suicidal ideations.

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Statements	Mean	Standard deviation
I understand my life's meaning	4.91	1.574
My life has a clear sense of purpose	4.99	1.500
I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful	5.10	1.401
I have discovered a satisfying life purpose	4.77	1.495

Table 4. Mean and SD of MLQ (N=90)

Questions	Mean	Standard deviation
Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself?	2.18	1.435
How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year?	1.98	1.177
Have you ever told someone that you were going to attempt suicide or that you might do it?	1.35	0.799
How likely is it that you will attempt suicide some day?	1.66	1.065

Table 5. Mean and SD of SBQR and Test of reliability (N=90)

In table 4 and 5, the mean and standard deviations of MLQ and SBQR is listed out.

Themes for second objectives



Figure 3. Map of themes for research objective 2 (N=20)

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Themes	Interpretation	Extracts
Self- worth and their good qualities	This include the attributes that the respondents admired about themselves such as their life, their health ,their humbleness and honesty, sense of humour, the respect they have for one self, having a sense of empathy towards others and selflessness.	<i>"... I value that I'm a human being, I value that I try to be a better person each day. You know, I have that sense of humanity still left in me...being selfless..."</i> (24 years, F, Khasi)
Altruism and leaving a legacy:	This theme includes the legacy that they would like to leave behind. Most respondent replied with desire to acknowledge the world about the need of one another, to care and understand the broken, bring happiness to the unprivileged, reaching out to people through music, and to maintain peace and love.	<i>"I want to make people happy through my music. I want them to feel something. It's always nice when people just don't listen to it but they find the connection with song or something like that"</i> (21 years, M, Khasi)
Creative self-expression and recreational activities	Indulging in recreational activities such as playing ,musical instruments, writing songs, producing music, reading books, listening to music playing with pets, sports activities and going for an adventure(hiking) and interior designing, making cosplay, sketching are some of the way of expressing themselves.	<i>"... I'm that hyperactive kind of a person so I'm always out-doing somewhere like hiking or trekking o camping or anything outdoor."</i> (22 years, F, Garo)
Academic, career and life goals	This includes respondents short and long term goals-future, academics and their daily life. Goals such as attaining the family's expectations by getting employed in desired jobs and providing comfort. Some respondents stated their personal goals is to built and improve themselves as to acquire a peaceful life.	<i>"I want to go for further studies like read more so one day I can be someone else that people can look upto."</i> (21 years, F , Khasi) <i>"It's like one day, I'll be like (giggles) making my mom stand and then in front of the crowd and then thanking her for supporting me and loving me, thank her and make her proud."</i> (22 years ,F , Jaintia)
Relationship with God	Most respondents maintain a close relationship wit God through prayer and also getting involved in church activities.	<i>"... my relationship with Him is very strong I'd say. I believe hid existence and I believe everything about Him."</i> (22 years, F , Garo)
Interpersonal relationships	The respondents stated that their relationship with their friends, family as well as others is crucial.	<i>"I care about my family, I care about my boyfriend, I care about my friends, I care about myself, I care about God like... you know they are important because if they are not there then what's the use of my life?"</i> (21 years, F, Khasi)

Table 4. Themes and interpretation for research objective 2

Similarly, the study done by Bhattacharya (2011) found out that personal goals, professional goals, sense of self -worth etc. provide the sense of meaning in life among the young adults.

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However, we also found creative self-expression and recreational activities, personal relationship with God, altruism and leaving a legacy in our study.

Findings for third objectives are:

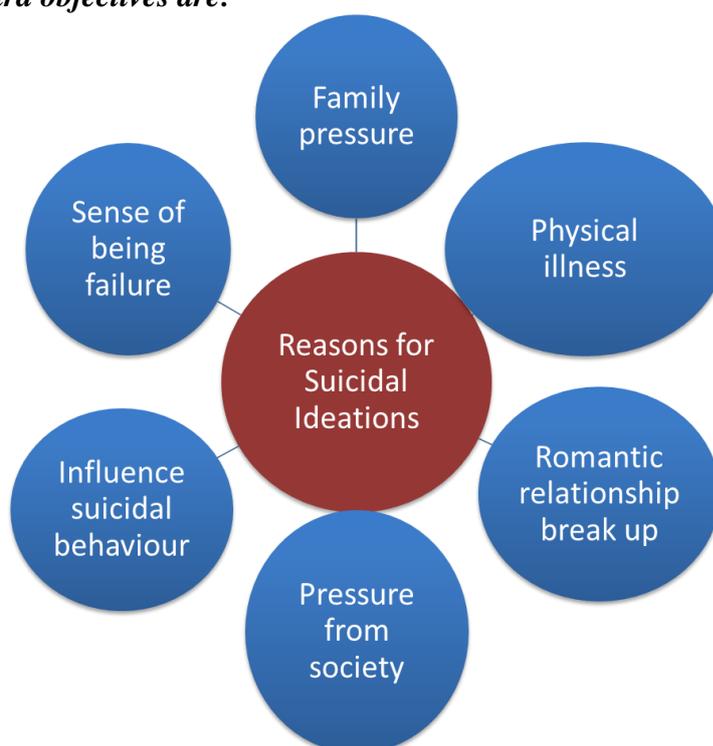


Figure 4. Map of themes for research objective 3 (N=20)

Themes	Interpretation	Extracts
Family pressure	Difficulties in reaching family expectations, conflict within the family were identified as the reasons for suicidal thoughts among most of the participants. In addition, being compared to another child was also seen as the cause of suicidal thoughts in one of the participants.	<i>“ It’s because of my parents, they were having problem between them, they were fighting all the time so, and then most of the time she always compared me to one of her friend’s daughter ...I really wanted to die.”</i> <i>(21 years, F, Jaintia)</i>
Psychological and physical pain	The feeling of hopelessness, frustration mixed emotions during adolescence and loneliness were some of the psychological factors along with anxiety and depression that were responsible for suicidal ideation. Also suffering from physical health problems and getting into accident made one of the respondents to contemplate on suicide.	<i>“ ... there was a time when I lost my dad and then I lost my grandfather as well as ... getting all this sickness and all these things and it’s like I feel like there will be no one”</i> <i>(22 years, F, Jaintia)</i>

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<p>Romantic relationship breakup</p>	<p>Separation from one's partner, guilt of not being loyal, rejections and betrayal in relationship is another cause for suicidal ideations among some of the participants.</p>	<p><i>"...I remember like I cut myself I slit my wrist superficially...that was because I hated what I did I cheated on my ex-boyfriend. So I didn't like the idea of hurting other people." (21 years, F)</i></p>
<p>Pressure from society</p>	<p>Immense stress from the result of people passing on judgements, comments and labelling the family of one of the participants was the cause for suicidal ideation.</p>	<p><i>"My society gave me hard time. They started pointing fingers at me, making me a person that I'm not." (22 years, F, Garo)</i></p>
<p>Influential suicidal behaviour</p>	<p>Learning from media and other people how to harm oneself.</p>	<p><i>"I was very young. Those days it was just social influence... like they(people) didn't say c'mon you do but then I learnt that from them...I saw then, they used to talk, she cut-cut herself with a knife, she cut herself with a razor , o I can use that." (21, F, Garo)</i></p>
<p>Sense of being a failure</p>	<p>Failing in academics, getting lower marks than expected as well as making a bad decisions regarding one's career. Some of the participants felt as a failure which were seen as the reason for suicidal ideations in them.</p>	<p><i>"... I've felt like a failure, I felt like existence wasn't making sense because my sports life just went down the drain and I felt a failure because I let down my whole entire family who was like "go-go" like why the heck ... I just gave up the best thing in my life." (22, F, Garo)</i></p>

Table 5. Themes and interpretation for research objective 3 (N=20)

According to the study by Bahramian & Vaidya (2019) found that family problems, school/college problems, social problems and personal problems leads to the development of suicidal ideation. However, we also found that in our study that romantic relationship break-up, sense of being a failure, psychological and physical pain were also the other reasons for suicidal ideations.

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Findings for fourth objectives are

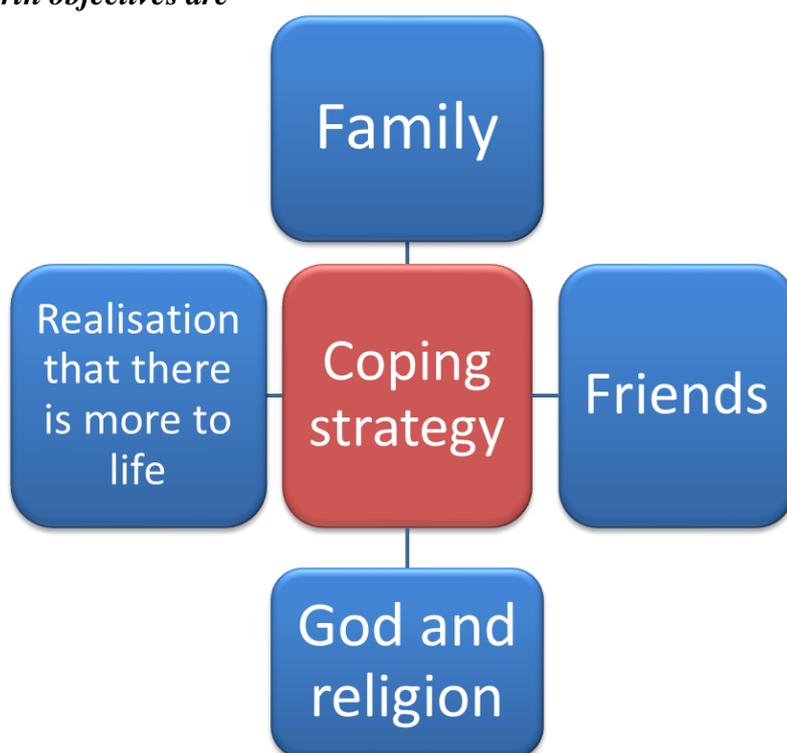


Figure 5. Map of themes for research objective 4 (N=20)

Themes	Interpretation	Extracts
God and religion	For some of the respondents, their relationship and knowledge about God that He cares act as a protective factor against it and also fear of the religious implications of suicide	<i>“ Because I’m scared to go to hell that’s why.”</i> <i>(21 years , F, Garo)</i>
Realisation that there is more to life	Some of the respondents realised that their pain is momentary problems and suicide is an selfish act.	<i>“ People I actually know committed suicide and seeing the aftermath they have done, it’s stupid, selfish and it’s cowardly.”</i> <i>(21 years, M, Khasi)</i>

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Friends	Received advice, love and support from friends act as a coping strategy	<p><i>“The only thing that really saved me was the love that I got from my best friend. I’ve never had anybody who cared so much”</i></p> <p><i>(24 years, F, Khasi)</i></p>
Family	Thoughts about impact of aftermath of suicide on family, support from family members were the major reasons which stopped many of the participants to act on suicide. Also, for one of the participants, her concern for the siblings(they were orphaned) is the main reason.	<p><i>I have to look after my them (siblings) because if I do it(suicide) what if I die? What will that do to my siblings without me?</i></p> <p><i>(24 years, F, Khasi)</i></p>

Table 6: Themes and Interpretation of research objective 4 (N=20)

A study by Shaheen & Jahan (2017) found out that family support, high social support helps to manage the stress and reports low level of suicidal ideation and they also stated that other factors could contribute to reduce suicidal ideations. And similarly, our study found that family support helps to prevent suicidal ideations furthermore. We found that God, religion and self- realisation are the other factors which helps in prevention of suicidal ideations.

CONCLUSION

The findings in our study indicated that there is less presence of meaning among the youths of Shillong and there is higher percentage of suicidal ideations. Our quantitative data showed a negative correlation between meaning in life and suicidal ideations which was supported by the qualitative themes. Also, it was found that family, personal goals , God , religion, and realisation that there is more to life are the sources of meaning in life; which helps them to cope during stressful events and also it is what held them back from ending one’s own life. Like any other research we too were limited in our study. The few limitations are: The sample size was less to represent the whole youth’s population in Meghalaya. There was less time and lack of funds to do extensive research in other parts of Meghalaya. As the suicides rates are alarming high each year, we recommend to do more research on this area and come about with prevention strategies to tackle this issue of suicide. Our research can be done in further remote areas in Meghalaya and this study can be replicated in other parts of the country as well on different age groups. The various educational institution can organise workshops or seminars on the importance of meaning in life in Meghalaya and our country, India. Religious institutions can also conduct programmes for the youths to enhance their meaning in life and also, the psychologists or social workers, if dealing with issues of suicide can also incorporate meaning in life as a part of their profession.

Ethical considerations

All respondents were protected with the ethical standard of Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong. Respondents consent was taken before distributing the demographic profile and questionnaire. They were given the right to withdraw any time of the study. Confidentiality was maintained.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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