

# AOSW 2026



## Annual Conference

**June 10-12, 2026**

Portland Marriott Downtown Waterfront  
Portland, Oregon USA

**Pre-Conferences: June 9, 2026**

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## **Restoring Purpose: Overview of Meaning Centered Psychotherapy (MCP) with Adaptations for Advanced Care Patients, Service Delivery for Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant Patients, and the Use of Telehealth**

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# Acknowledgments/Disclosures

- We have no conflicts of interest/financial disclosures
- Time for questions at the end
- Thank you to MD Anderson Cancer Center and University of Michigan for the opportunity to present
- For the purpose of the case study, the name was changed
- Please take care of your needs!

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## Objectives

- Participants will learn about the evidenced-based Meaning Centered Psychotherapy (MCP) group program, including its goals, structure and themes
- Participants will learn about three innovations to the curriculum that enhances the evidence-based model
- Participants will learn about three specific creative response interventions to present to patients in each cohorts' final group session
- Participants will learn about the process, purpose and associated risks of allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (Allo-HSCT)
- Participants will recognize common psychosocial barriers that can arise before, during, and after the Allo-HSCT process.
- Participants will learn how to integrate MCP into care to enhance recovery and improve long-term psychosocial outcomes for Allo-HSCT patients.

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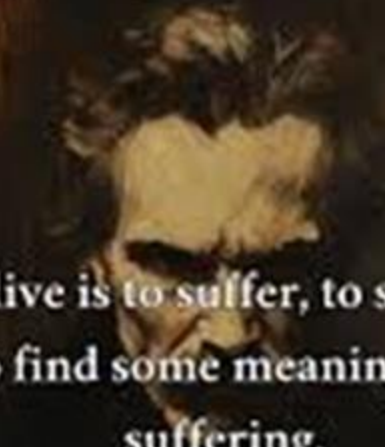
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To live is to suffer, to survive  
is to find some meaning in the  
suffering.

— *Friedrich Nietzsche*

# Introduction to Meaning Centered Psychotherapy (MCP) and Implications

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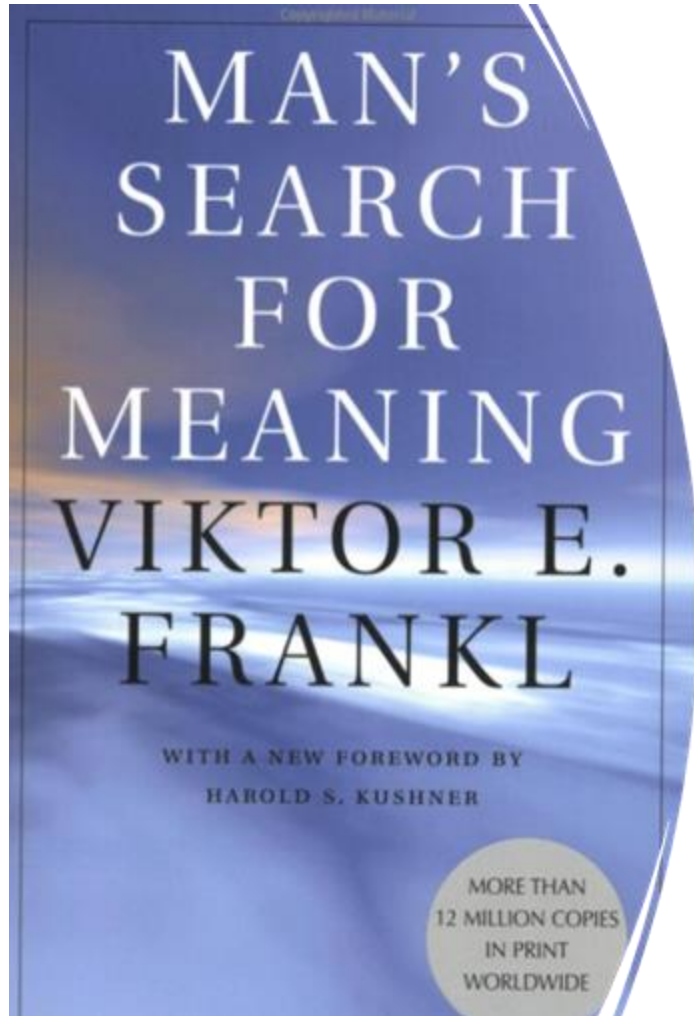
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- Origin- Man's Search for Meaning
- “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how” Friedrich Nietzsche
- Belief that life that life has meaning until our very last breath and that we can choose our attitude even in the most difficult circumstances.
- MCP is adapted by Dr. William Breitbart, Psychiatrist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center
- An existential therapeutic model developed to address the existential issue of suffering, guilt and death
- Utilizes didactic and experiential exercises, can be implemented in individual and group therapy formats



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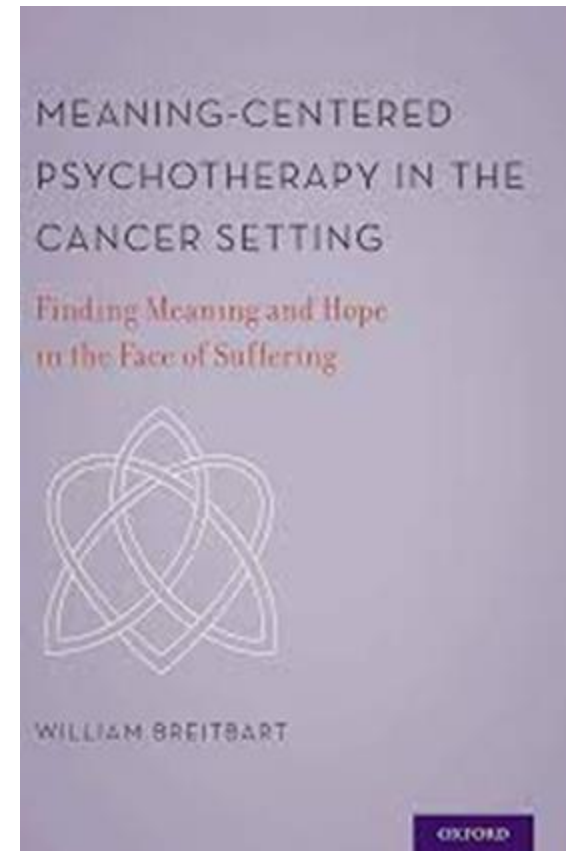
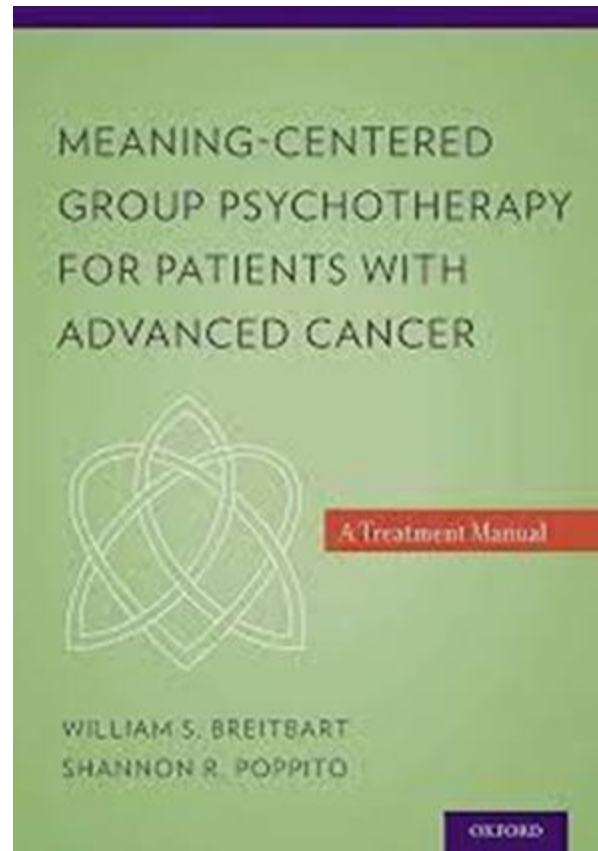
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# Treatment Manuals



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## Definitions of Meaning



**1. Having a sense that one's life has meaning involves the conviction that one is fulfilling a unique role and purpose in a life that is a gift.**

- A life that comes with responsibility to live to one's full potential as a human being.

- In so doing, being able to achieve a sense of peace, contentment or even transcendence through connectedness with something greater than one's self.

**1. Meaningfulness refers to moments that make life worth living, when you feel needed or alive. Things from the past that, when you look back on them, you still find to be very important.**

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# Meaningful Moments

- **Session 1 Exercise**
- **Describe one or two experiences or moments when life has felt particularly meaningful to you – whether it sounds powerful or mundane.** For example, it could be something that helped you get through a difficult day, or a time when you felt most alive. What did these experiences reflect about your life, and why do you think they are important to you?



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# Cancer and Meaning

**Cancer**



- Suffering
- Limitations
- Identity
- Death/Mortality
- Guilt



- Enhance Meaning
- Maintain Meaning
- Loss of Meaning

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# Sources of Meaning

**1. Creative** – work, deeds, causes, artistic endeavors, hobbies, etc.

- Examples include our careers/job, volunteer work, involvement with church/synagogue, political and social causes, writing, painting

**2. Experiential**- Connecting with Life through relationships, nature, art, humor

- Examples include our family, children, loved ones, the sunset, gardening, beaches, museums, playing with pets, etc

**3. Historical**- our lasting legacy

- Our past, present and future legacy we hope to leave behind, for example, our family history, our accomplishments, values and life lessons we would like to pass along to others

**4. Attitudinal**- turning personal tragedy into triumph, things we achieved despite hardships, rising above difficult circumstances

- Examples include achieving an education despite personal/financial challenges, overcoming grief and loss, persevering through cancer treatment, etc.

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# MCP and Social Work

- Both Person Centered
- Strengths based
- MCP can be less intimidating than traditional forms of therapy – more of a collaborative effort or “learning workshop” between patient and clinician
- Few other interventions focus on mortality and existential/spiritual issues
- Belief that every life has value – dignity and worth of the person – SW code of ethics
- Focus on what the patient has control over and choices they have made/can make



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# Who are good candidates for MCP?

- Bring up existential or identity issues
- “I feel lost”
- “I don’t know who I am anymore”
- “What’s the point of going on?”
- Having difficulty accepting limitations
- Going through difficult adjustment or loss
- Motivated and able to actively participate (homework between sessions)



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# Effectiveness

- Particularly effective for Advanced Cancer Patients, and support groups for patients near end of life.
- Breitbart and his colleagues found that meaning and spiritual well-being plays a central role in well-being at the end of life, protecting against depression, hopelessness and desire for hastened death
- MCP was more effective than CBT in increasing meaning in life, purpose and life goals (Marco, Llombart, Romero, Garcia-Conde, Corral, Guillen, Perez, 2024)
- MCP group psychotherapy had an impact on reducing depression immediately after the intervention and at 3 months post intervention, indicating that meaning has an impact on reducing depression (Holtmaat et al., 2024).



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## Single Session MCP ideas

- Start from where your client is
- Even a brief discussion on meaning can have a great impact
- What are they missing or disconnected from?
- Listen for other sources of meaning and help the patient make connections (Legacy, creativity, attitude or experiential)
- Consider the importance of your role in Witnessing/Hearing about what's meaningful for them
- It is powerful to share memories and can help them experience meaning in the moment
- Empower patients to continue to identify meaning in their lives and goals they would like to fulfill
- Highlight choices that they have made in their lives and are making (choice to choose their attitude, to have grace with themselves, to be authentic/kind)

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# Applications

- Need for additional training programs for staff on this approach.
- MD Anderson implemented a modified training format which trained interested Social Work Counselors and an APP.
- Need to increase the diversity of clinicians who are trained in this approach and application to underserved populations.
- Concerns for clinician countertransference/overidentification with patients



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## Adaptation of the group format: from in-person to online

- COVID 19 –Virtual Demand
- PowerPoint Slides with images to compliment content in manual
- Group outline to guide therapists' facilitation for session
- Facilitator recapitulated key points to enhance attunement and reinforce patients experience of being witnessed.

### Group Data from 2018 -2026

Total Groups – 21 cohorts

Avg. Members – 5 per cohort

Total pts completed group – 92

Total pt's deceased – 54

Average Age – 56 years

### Four most common diagnoses

1. Breast
2. Ovarian
3. Sarcoma
4. Melanoma



Life as legacy that one lives and gives



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### Enhancement to Curriculum

Session 7 – **Experiential Meaning: Love Beauty and Humor** - incorporating participant “Show and Share”

What led to this curriculum enhancement?



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### 3. Affirmations

Begin by finding a comfortable position that is easy and supported. I am attuned to my breath and breathing, simply noticing my filling and emptying.....receiving and releasing.

- *More and more old worries fall away, and I can wear my velvet around the house.*
- *I find sanctuary in nature, simplicity and connections with close friends and loved ones.*
- *Dancing on the dock with lightening in the clouds reminds me I am surrounded by energy.*
- *The gift of quilting reflects living: textures, colors, swatches of experiences, lessons, losses and play.*
- *I value myself as a human being vs a human doing.*
- *As my energy shrinks, what's important grows larger.*
- *I am expanding my ability to love "hard."*
- *I am still. I am still here. I am still here.*



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## Qualitative feedback from patient survey regarding facilitators' creative reflections

- *"I love the words chosen for me...my life has been worth it...It shows how much interest and attention you paid to our lives. I like all this as it further helps us appreciate our life."*
- *"The creative reflections are a helpful tool to shift perspective and view the feedback from a new angle. It can be eye-opening to take an unexpected perspective."*
- *I found it to be very moving and insightful... I enjoyed that each clinician worked in their own unique medium. It was a lovely way to hear from the facilitators and feel seen and heard. It also reminded me of what we had shared over the time we were together."*
- *I treasure the collage you made for me! It still makes me feel seen and accepted."*
- *Yes, the (creative reflection) added to my experience. I felt heard and seen."*



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## Program innovation -Development of Monthly Meaning Centered Graduate Group (MMCGG)

What led to this innovation?

Offering an opportunity for participants to revisit, refine and deepen personal reflections on existential themes.

### Monthly Meaning Centered Graduates Group Data

Monthly groups have run since June 2018 (96 sessions)

- Average member attendance – 6 people
- Average regular attenders – 11 people
- Number of deaths – 54 people
- Number of members moved out of state – 4 people

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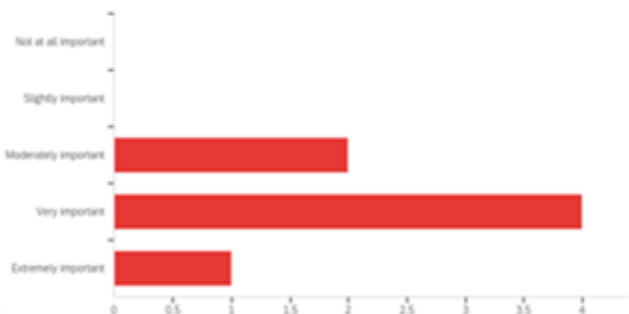
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## Data from patient survey about MMCGG

Meaning Centered Graduates Group Survey

Q1 - How important is the "check-in/health updates" portion of our Meaning Centered Graduates Group?

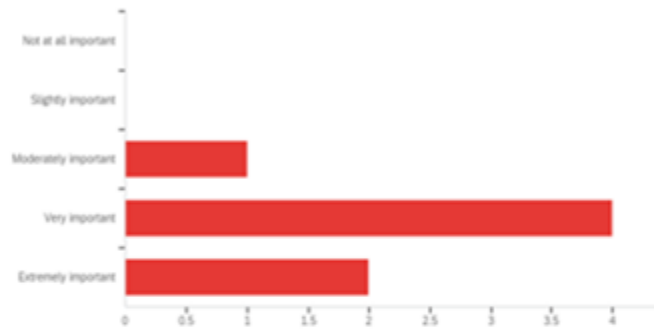


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How important is the "check-in/health updates" portion of our Meaning Centered Graduates Group?	3.00	5.00	3.86	0.64	0.41	7

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not at all important	0.00%	0
2	Slightly important	0.00%	0
3	Moderately important	28.57%	2
4	Very important	57.14%	4
5	Extremely important	14.29%	1
	Total	100%	7

Q2 - How important is having a meaning-centered reflection question for the meetings?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How important is having a meaning-centered reflection question for the meetings?	3.00	5.00	4.14	0.64	0.41	7

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not at all important	0.00%	0
2	Slightly important	0.00%	0
3	Moderately important	14.29%	1
4	Very important	57.14%	4
5	Extremely important	28.57%	2
	Total	100%	7

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## Sample prompt for MMCGG

Here are the prompt questions for you to consider:

1. What thoughts and feelings does this image evoke in you?
2. What narrative do you connect with it?
3. How does this image relate to you or the way you make meaning of your life experience with cancer?



Artwork by: **NariMoon**, an artist who focuses on the connection between inner and outer worlds through art



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## Meaning Centered Therapy (MCP) and Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant

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## MCP in Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant (SCT) Care

- MCP focuses on meaning for those facing life-threatening illnesses
- Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant patients face many existential and emotional challenges
- MCP principles can be applied to support coping throughout the transplant journey



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## What is Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplant (SCT)?

- Medical procedure in which healthy stem cells are infused into a person to replace their own stem cells that have been destroyed by treatment
- Autologous (person's own stem cells) or Allogeneic (related or unrelated donor)
- Can cure blood cancers and other diseases



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# Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant

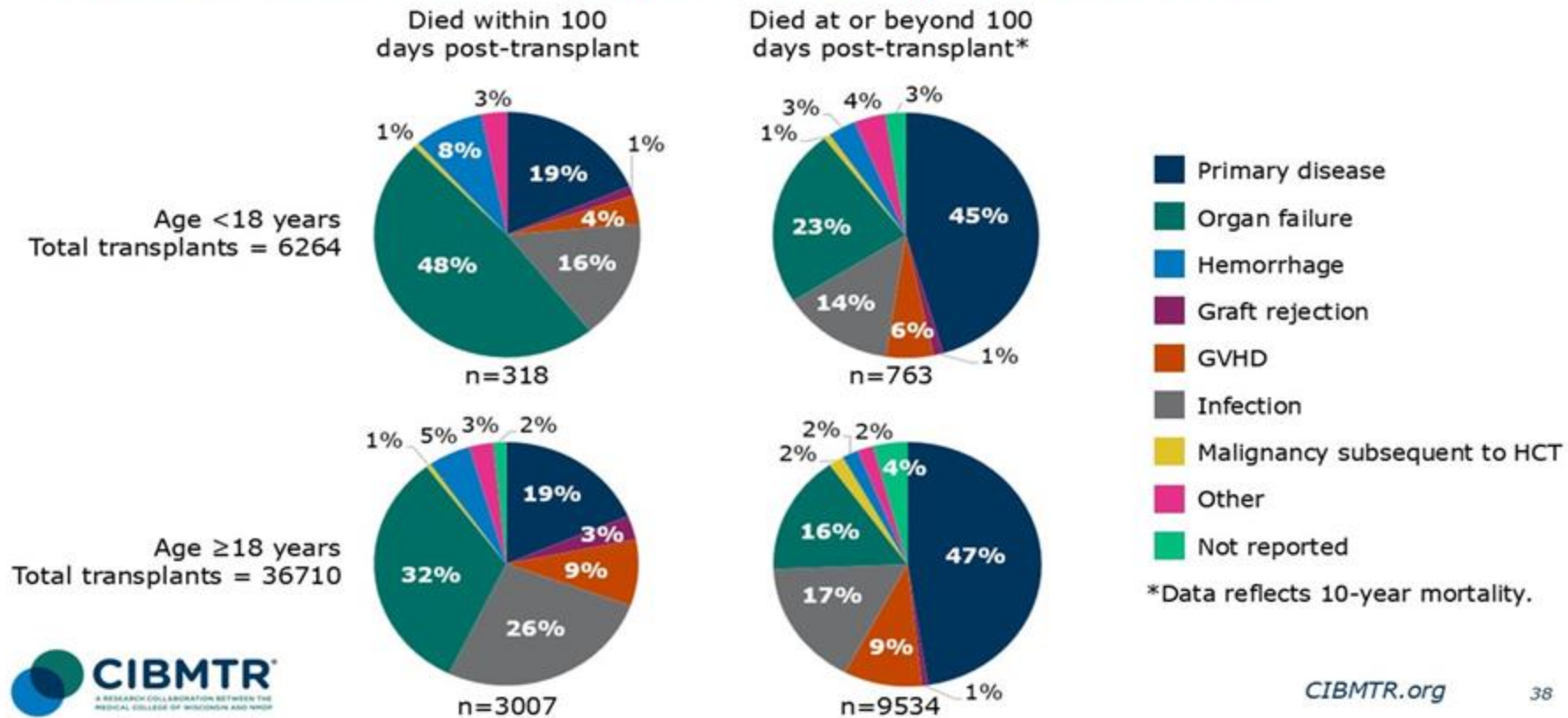
- “High-risk/High-reward” type of therapy.
- 3 to 6 weeks inpatient hospitalization while the blood counts recover
- Once engrafted, patient is discharged and required to stay locally for 100 days after transplant.
- Required 24/7 caregiver for 100 days for follow-up care
- Primary Risks and Complications
  - Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD)
  - Infections
  - Graft Failure
  - Organ Damage and Toxicity
  - Relapse
  - Late Effects





# Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant: Challenges & Recovery

## Causes of Death after Allogeneic HCTs in the US, 2019-2023



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# Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant: Challenges & Recovery

- Coping with extreme uncertainty
- Psychological Endurance
- Identity
- Motivation
- Daily lives, routines, and norms
- Chronic health conditions
- Social isolation

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# Finding Meaning Through Allo-SCT

1. Addresses distress
2. Reduces depression, anxiety, and hopelessness
3. Strengthens resilience during prolonged recovery
4. Improves engagement in their treatment
5. Helps reconstruct identity after illness
6. Enhances quality of life



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# Integrating Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy



- Multidisciplinary care
- Offer structured sessions (adapted for stem cell transplant patients)
- Include caregivers when appropriate
- Use tangible tools

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# Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplant: Case Study

- 27 yo Army veteran, Mr. Smith, who suffers from a history of PTSD, Anxiety, and several medical conditions/injuries from his time serving in the Army
- Diagnosed with T-cell Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia about 3 years after his military service
- Had 3 cycles of high dose chemotherapy to achieve remission
- Had a successful allogeneic stem cell transplant
- 10 months later, developed chronic Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD) which attacked his lungs, skin, oral, ocular, and liver
- He suffers from flashbacks to both military and cancer treatment experiences, feelings of worthlessness/being a burden, and a loss of focus on a reason to keep living

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# Meaning Centered Psychotherapy Approach

**God** grant me the  
**Serenity**  
to accept the things I  
cannot change . . .

**Courage** to  
change the things I can  
and **Wisdom** to  
know the difference . . .

- Exploration of Meaning - Identity Beyond & Prior to Diagnosis
- Acknowledge Identity Change
- Identifying meaning during & despite suffering

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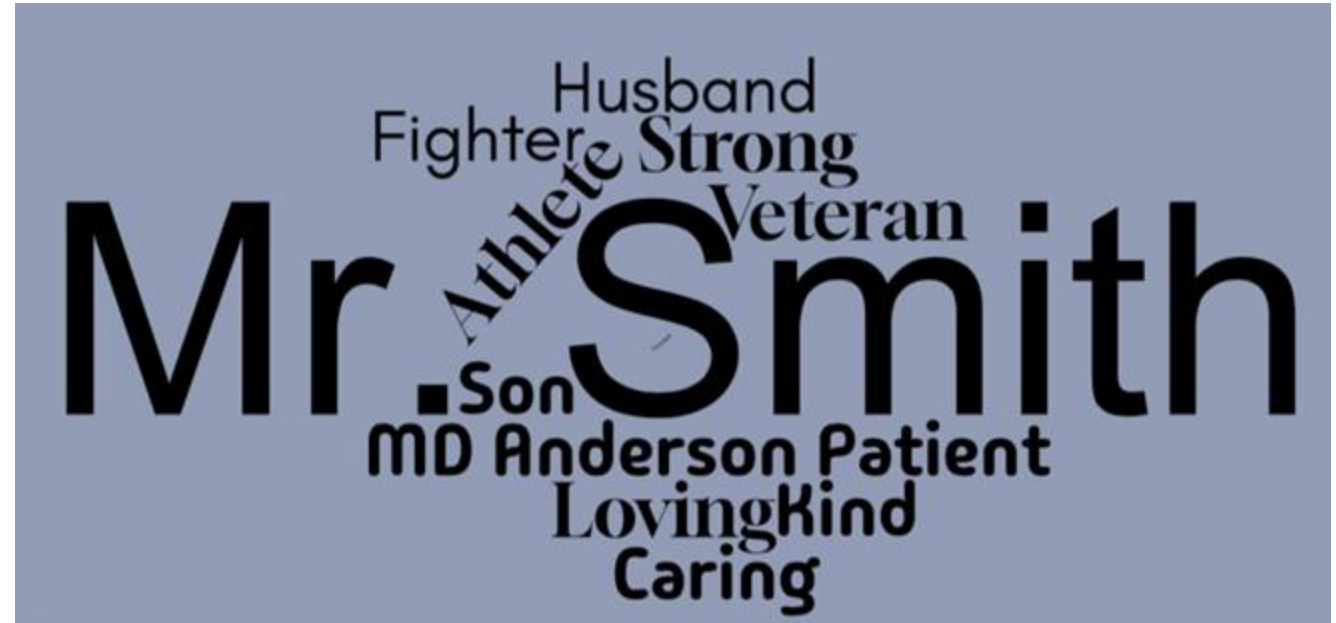
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## MCP Applied: Case Study for 27yo Veteran

### Goals Set:

- Developing an Identity
- Process Historical Experiences
- Worked On Developing Meaningful Moments
- Writing Your Story
- Speaking with SWC
- Veteran Support Group



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## Key Takeaways

- Allo-HSCT is emotionally challenging and MCP can help rebuild a sense of identity
- Psychosocial care is essential in recovery
- MCP improves meaning and recovery outcomes
- MCP helps cope with long-term uncertainty
- MCP support group and telehealth



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## Closing Reflections



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# AOSW 2026



## Annual Conference

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It is often not feasible to meet with patients more than 1-2 times during their hospitalization or in the outpatient environment. Although the efficacy of delivering MCP in a single session has not yet been formally established, feedback from patients was that this has been quite helpful.

### **Four Sources of Meaning:**

**Historical** – the legacy that was given to you, legacy that you live, and future legacy you hope to give

**Creative** – engaging in life through work, hobbies, volunteering, community/family you create, re: courage, commitment, and responsibility

**Experiential** –connecting with life through love, beauty, and humor

**Attitudinal** – turning personal tragedy into triumph, the attitude taken towards circumstances beyond your control

It may not be appropriate to delve into the history of MCP but providing a brief orientation to “meaning” can be helpful. You can offer a variation of the statement:

*Meaningfulness refers to moments when you feel most connected to existence, to your sense of self, and to what is most important to you. Meaning can come from past experiences that, whether tragic, or joyful, awesome or dreadful, when you look back on them, you find to be life affirming and profound. Or it can be experienced momentarily such as by laughing with someone, listening to a song, or noticing a beautiful image. Reflecting on meaning can be a way to cope with suffering and reconnect you to what is most important to you when things are at their most difficult.*

After introducing the patient to the rationale for talking about meaning, you can consider delivering one of the following experiential exercises. It may be helpful to spend a few minutes with the patient to assess which source of meaning might be the most relevant to them. Meaningful moments, historical sources of meaning and experiential sources of meaning tend to resonate with patients the most; however attitudinal or creative sources of meaning may also be important depending on what you observe your patient is dealing with.

### **Meaningful Moments (Session 1)**

- *Describe one or two experiences or moments when life has felt particularly meaningful to you – whether it sounds powerful or mundane.*
- This exercise is a broad invitation to reflect on meaning and the SWC can provide reflections on the sources of meaning that they hear in the patient’s story to enhance their sense of meaning. One moment may be reflective of multiple sources of meaning. This exercise can be used alone or as a way of assessing which other exercise might be relevant to go more in depth with the patient.

### **Identity before and after cancer diagnosis (Session 2)**

- *How has cancer affected or changed what’s meaningful to you?*
- *What are some other aspects of you that cancer hasn’t changed?*

For example, cancer doesn’t change someone’s core personality characteristics or values. If they can come up with some characteristics that still make them feel like themselves, then you can delve more into how their present reality looks different than what they were used to doing and talk about ways to engage with life under their present circumstances. In other cases, cancer may have been a wake-up call and inspired them to appreciate things they used to take for granted. Feelings of grief due to losses cancer has imposed should be validated and are to be expected.

### **Historical Sources of Meaning (Session 3)**

- *A) When you look back on your life, upbringing, family history, what are the significant memories, relationships, traditions, values, which have made the greatest impact on who you are today?*
- *B) What are the accomplishments or roles you are most proud of and some of the life lessons or*

*values you would want to pass on to others? What is the legacy you hope to continue to live and give?*

This exercise is particularly useful and appropriate for a patient who would benefit from life review in more depth. However, they can elicit a lot of content, and depending on time constraints and the patient's physical or mental capacity you may choose to focus on just one of these questions. It can be enough for a patient to share their story with you as a way of living and giving their legacy. It might also serve as an inspiration to the patient to share their story with their loved ones. It's also important to get across that legacy is a living concept (something we're creating each day), not only associated with death and being remembered.

#### **Creative Sources of Meaning (Session 4)**

- *Do you feel you've expressed what is most meaningful to you through your life's work and creative activities (e.g., job, parenting, hobbies, causes, family or community)? – If so, how?*
- *Do you have unfinished business? What tasks have you always wanted to do, but have yet to undertake? What's holding you back from responding to this creative call?*

It takes a great deal of courage to move forward despite an uncertain future. Here is where the 'doing' intersects with the meaning of being alive. It is important to note that guilt may come up, that they were not able to finish their projects, continue in their job, etc. Remind patients that we are all human and have limitations, practicing forgiveness towards oneself is crucial here.

#### **Attitudinal Sources of Meaning (Session 5)**

- *What are some of the life limitations, losses, or obstacles you have faced in the past, and how did you cope with them at the time?*
- *Since your diagnosis, what are the specific limitations or losses you have faced, and how are you coping or dealing with them now? Are you still able to find meaning in your daily life despite your awareness of the limitations and finiteness of life? [If yes, please briefly describe.]*

The idea that one can choose their attitude toward suffering can be very powerful because it may be one of the few freedoms that they have left. If you observe an in-the-moment example of attitude, it may be enough to reflect to the patient the perspective that they are choosing on their circumstances as part of their unique identity and sense of meaning.

#### **Experiential Sources of Meaning (Session 6)**

- *Describe 3 ways in which you connect with life through love, beauty and humor.*

This is often the most accessible exercise when limitations due to illness increase. This involves experiencing rather than actively creating meaning. You can explain that experiential sources of meaning can be experienced in the moment, such as by making jokes with the nurses, or through memory. You could ask the patient to tell a story of when they experienced love, beauty, and humor by asking them to describe what they sensed (what did they see, hear, touch, taste, feel)? You could ask them how they felt with family visiting or with the care they are receiving if they are hospitalized. This may be helpful if a patient has numerous regrets about the past and historical sources of meaning would be too complex to address.

#### **Therapeutic Stance:**

It's important to choose your own attitude towards this brief intervention as well that even a brief discussion on meaning can be very beneficial and impactful for a patient. The principal tenet of MCP is that *there is always potential to create and connect with meaning until we draw our last breath.*