



# Positive Facets of Suffering, Meaningful Moments, and Meaning Fulfilment: A Qualitative Approach to Positive Existential Issues in Trauma-Exposed University Students

Arantxa Y. Arredondo<sup>1</sup> · Beatriz Caparrós<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The possible positive consequences of trauma and its relationship to existential aspects are receiving increasing attention. However, little is known about how young individuals perceive the changed status of these profound aspects of their lives. This study aimed to explore and identify the themes of the possible positive aspects of trauma-related suffering, the most meaningful moments, and the perception of meaning realization in young individuals. A total of 139 trauma-exposed Mexican university students responded to a survey consisting of open-ended questions survey. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The main benefits of suffering were a better attitude towards life, more maturity and strength, new capabilities, and a reorganization of values, purposes, and beliefs. In reference to significant moments, the themes of the importance of bonds with significant people, spiritual moments, and personal achievements emerged. Both meaning realization and existential frustration were observed. Meaning was mainly oriented towards career goals, other people, personal growth, and financial goals. Findings suggested several patterns of existential concerns for Mexican university students. Both personal and interpersonal levels were cited as pivotal aspects for the transformation of young people after trauma. Theoretical and practical implications were discussed.

**Keywords** Qualitative analysis · Positive existential psychology · Trauma-exposed · University students

## Abbreviations

MMM Meaningful moments measure (Wong, 2013a, b)  
MOSM Meaning of suffering measure (Wong, 2013a, b)

## Introduction

The existential perspective focuses on understanding how life is experienced by each individual (Spinelli, 1989) and how core human concerns manifest psychologically (May, 1983). These issues involve questions about individuals' perceptions and experiences of their existence (Lundvall et al., 2018). Existential questions are universal and inherent to humanity (Yalom, 1980). At the same time, they are unique and individual, and everybody has to confront them by themselves (Jurica et al., 2014). Existential positive psychology explicitly addresses the significance of integrating negative facets with positive ones, emphasizing the courage and responsibility of confronting existential distress and living an authentic life (Wong, 2009).

Suffering is a mental process, and the reasons for it vary from person to person (Loeser, 2000). Psychological suffering refers to mental and emotional acute distress in response to shocking and disturbing experiences such as traumatic events (VandenBos, 2015) and implies the presence of psychological symptoms. According to the existential positive perspective, existential anxieties are essential for human flourishing, and people have exceptional capacity for resilience and beneficial transformation after experiencing suffering (Taylor, 2012; Wong, 2010). From the study of post-traumatic growth, resilience and adaptation, it is understood that there can be positive consequences from suffering. However, there is not much knowledge about what the individual describes as important.

✉ Arantxa Y. Arredondo  
arantxa.arredondo@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Psychology Department, University of Girona, Plaça Sant Domènec, 9., Campus Barri Vell., 17004 Girona, Spain

This approach also focuses on the importance of meaningful moments, experiences that imply a reflection and interpretation of the value and significance of an action or event. These moments can be deeply felt, deeply processed, enlightening, and transforming (Wong, 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, it centres on the meaning of life, a more popular concept in the psychological field, which is both a cognitive and emotional assessment of whether one's life has purpose and value (Baumeister et al., 2013). This evaluation can result either as meaning fulfilment—a subjective satisfactory appraisal of one's own life that weighs personal goals, the corresponding achievement of these goals, and one's attitude towards them- or its opposite, existential frustration (Frankl, 1963; Lukas, 1989). This outcome is relatively independent of a person's external situation and can be achieved in difficult conditions (Lukas, 1989).

Existential questions may be triggered during development from childhood to young adulthood as part of the aging process (Yalom, 1980) due to involvement in new roles and challenges (Hwang et al., 2018; Lundvall et al., 2018) and identity development (Adamson et al., 1999). Moreover, existential crises during youth can affect individuals so much that they lead to risky behaviour (To et al., 2007). Despite this, and perhaps because of the notion that these issues are exclusive to adulthood and maturity, research has comparatively overlooked these issues in young people. Finally, it is important to note that positively experienced existential issues have been observed to have beneficial consequences on individuals' functionality, mental health, and other psychological correlates (Van de Goor et al., 2020; Glaw et al., 2017). Understanding these issues is important for theoretical and practical reasons. It can help researchers attain an in-depth comprehension of these individual perceptions and offer useful information about psychological assets and resources for interventions addressed to young people affected by trauma.

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for studying subjective, personal experiences (Boston et al., 2001), allowing existential research to delve into individual meanings that cannot be easily put into numbers. Previous studies have focused on suffering-related benefits (Ablett et al., 2007; West et al., 2012), meaningful moments through the lens of emotions of wonder (van de Goor, 2017), and meaning in life's relationship with happiness (Bhattacharya, 2011). In general, these qualitative outcomes confirm the complexity of these subjects, point out the relevance they have in diverse areas of life and indicate a gap in knowledge of the content of the potentially positive side.

To our knowledge, no recent qualitative approach has been undertaken regarding these individual positive existential aspects in trauma-affected youth. Thus, this study aimed to explore these, and provide a view of the structure and general patterns of certain positive aspects of the

suffering caused by traumatic experiences, the most significant moments, and people's perception of meaning fulfilment. Thus, our objectives aimed at answering the following research questions:

- What are the benefits of suffering caused by a traumatic experience? Are there any worthy causes to endure that suffering? What helps to cope with the suffering?
- What moments have the most meaningful life-impact?
- How do individuals self-perceive regarding what they have wanted to be and what they have worked for, in contrast to what they have achieved? Can it be interpreted through the presence of meaning fulfilment or existential frustration?

## Methods

### Background

This research was part of a more extensive investigation of traumatic experiences, existential concerns, and other associated psychological factors (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2019). The present study was a thematic analysis, a qualitative and exploratory approach to positive existential concerns in university students. We followed the recommendations for qualitative research in psychology by Levitt et al., (2017). The study was developed following the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki on the regulation of research and received ethical approval from the Research Ethics and Biosafety Committee of University of Girona (Spain) (#CEBRU0018-2020).

### Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience volunteer sample of 139 trauma-exposed Mexican university students (from 159 questionnaires retrieved, 20 were unanswered and thus were excluded). Individuals' ages ranged from 18 to 32, with an average of 21.39 years ( $SD = 2.53$ ). The majority were female and reported a medium socioeconomic level (Table 1). The most frequent study areas were psychology and economics, and almost all participants were undergraduate students.

### Instruments

A sociodemographic questionnaire was carried out for the research, collecting basic data on the individuals, such as their age, sex, and study area.

Additionally, participants answered the Global Post-traumatic Stress Scale (EGEP-5, by its initials in Spanish), developed and published by Crespo et al. (2017) which is

**Table 1** Participant data

	n	%
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	94	67.6
Male	45	32.4
<i>Perceived socio-economic level</i>		
Low	3	2.2
Medium-low	22	15.8
Medium	79	56.8
Medium-high	35	25.2
<i>Area of study</i>		
Psychology	61	43.9
Economics	49	35.3
History	18	12.7
Others	11	7.7
<i>Level of studies</i>		
Undergraduate	131	94.2
Postgraduate	8	5.8

based on the DSM-5 definition of trauma (APA, 2013). It explores the types and numbers of traumatic experiences and specific information about the worst traumatic event and PTSD symptomatology criteria in adult victims of different traumatic events. We only used the “Event” section for this study, including the type of the worst traumatic event, the moment it occurred, and the perceived severity.

To elicit information regarding existential concerns, we set up an open-ended questionnaire that included five questions (Fig. 1).

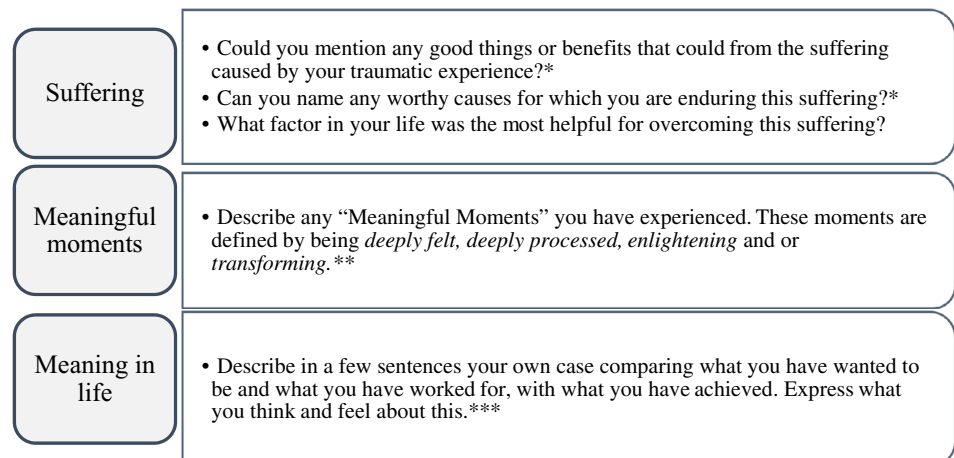
Three questions were retrieved from two qualitative existential measurements made by Wong (2013a, 2013b). First, participants answered two questions based on the Meaning

of Suffering Measure (MOSM; Wong, 2013a, 2013b). We did not include all questions, instead we made a selection based on the study’s objectives. The original questions were modified to specify that the suffering that was being assessed corresponded to their traumatic experience. In addition, we created and incorporated a third question that encompassed the factors that helped to overcome the suffering.

Additionally, we included the Meaningful Moments Measure (MMM; Wong, 2013a, 2013b), in which the respondent is asked to describe significant moments they had recently experienced. The instrument provides the following description of a meaningful moment: It is *deeply felt*: It touches your emotions in a deep and lasting way. More than a fleeting feeling, it reaches your innermost being. It is *deeply processed*: It involves deeper layers of meaning beyond the factual and superficial. It is *enlightening*: It provides a solution to some puzzling problems or leads to some new discovery. It is *transforming*: It enriches your life, changes its direction, or restores a sense of purpose and passion to your life.

Finally, we included a qualitative question from the Logo-test (Lukas, 1989). This instrument evaluates the inner realization of meaning or the extent to which a person considers their existence to have meaning. It explores the self-evaluation of the individuals regarding the goals in their life and their attitude in relation to success or failure. After evaluating the presence of happiness and suffering in a fictitious case provided by the instrument, the participant is asked to describe their own circumstances regarding life efforts and achievements. For the deductive analysis, we explored the presence of “realization of meaning” and “lack of meaning” which were evaluated using the descriptions and examples available in this instrument. The groups included only those answers with enough information to be categorized.

**Fig. 1** Data collection



Note: \*Questions taken and adapted from Wong, MOSM 2013, \*\* Questions taken and adapted from Wong MMM, 2013, \*\*\* Open-ended question from Logo-test (Lukas, 1989)

## Data Collection

The first step was contacting the university coordinators and then directly contacting the students, explaining the study and its objectives, and explicitly looking for participants. The inclusion criteria comprised university students over 18 years old with voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. This process was carried out in February and March 2018 at the participating universities, in group format and with the presence of a volunteer professor and one of the researchers. Considering that the topics investigated were sensitive, we explicitly informed participants that they were not obligated to answer the question(s) they did not want to answer, that they could leave the study at any time, and could withdraw their participation. There were no participant drop-outs. We used open-ended questions as they offer unconstrained participant responses and allow respondents to express their perspectives using their own words. Additionally, we provided a list of local organizations offering free attention and intervention for victims of different types of trauma and the respective contact information.

## Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, we conducted a qualitative exploration, using thematic analysis. For the first two questions, as we did not have a previous interpretation guide, we developed an inductive analysis for the identification of patterns. Each sub-theme (i.e., strengthened relationships) was named using content-characteristic words and then organized into broader themes (i.e., benefits related to other persons). Additionally, as for the question about the realization of meaning in life, as this is a construct with a greater theoretical background, and the instrument used already suggests the presence of themed interpretation, a deductive analysis was carried out to explore "realization of meaning" and "existential frustration", as explained in the instrument used. Furthermore, we developed an inductive analysis regarding the themes concerning meaning in life.

The two authors were equally involved in the process. Once the data had been analysed independently by the two researchers, a consensus was reached on the most relevant and frequent themes that stood out. Moreover, to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, constant comparison and persistent and prolonged engagement with the data were used.

As support for storing and managing the data, coding, identifying categories, concepts, and patterns, the qualitative analysis software MaxQDA2020 was used. We organized the predominant themes that arose from the analysis. For the categorization, the following guidelines were taken into account: (1) each answer belongs to at least one category of

those mentioned, (2) the same answer may comprise more than one category, and (3) a category can only be computed once for each individual response.

The frequencies and percentages are provided to offer a sense of the extent to which a particular construct was common across responses. Thus, it may be understood as being more broadly shared. Furthermore, we acknowledged and reported the number of individuals who did not respond to the questions and those who responded negatively. Additionally, examples of original citations are presented to ensure that the content and meaning of themes are illustrated. The participants' responses were in Spanish, and only those that were chosen for quote citation in this article were translated into English. The participants' names given in the manuscript are not their real names; they have been changed to protect their privacy.

## Results

### Traumatic Experiences

Regarding the type of traumatic experience, the most frequent were natural disasters (18.7%,  $n=26$ ), death of a loved one (18.7%,  $n=26$ ), physical violence (18.0%,  $n=25$ ), sexual violence (12.2%,  $n=17$ ), psychological violence (2.9%,  $n=4$ ), other (6.5%  $n=9$ ) and unspecified (11.5%,  $n=16$ ). Of those who reported when the experience occurred ( $n=115$ ), the majority indicated that it was during childhood or adolescence (61.7%,  $n=71$ ), (11.3%  $n=13$ ) more than three months ago, (23.5%  $n=27$ ) more than one month ago but less than three months ago, (3.5%,  $n=4$ ) within the last month.

### Positive Aspects of Suffering

As stated before, the positive aspects of trauma-related suffering were examined through three different themes. The first question explored if individuals had found any good thing or benefit from their suffering (Table 2). Almost every participant answered this question (98.7%), and 51 (31.4%) responded negatively. On average, this question obtained responses of 7.6 words, with a range between 1 and 31. Considering those who did report benefits, answers were categorized into individual and related to others.

The first category was personal-related or **individual benefits** (51.4%). The most common were related to the acquisition of new skills (13.3%). Some examples are: "*I learned to react faster*" (Lisa), "*I have grown and have been able to awaken resources I didn't know I had*" (Dani), "*Working on my resilience*" (Susi), and "*Self-knowledge*" (Luis). Participants also reported an **improved attitude or perspective** (10.5%). Many mentioned becoming more

**Table 2** Results of meaning in trauma-related suffering

Themes	Categories	n (%)	Subcategories	n (%)
Benefits	Individual	76 (54.7)	New skills	20 (14.3)
			Better attitude/perspective	16 (11.5)
			Becoming stronger	14 (9.8)
			Learning and lessons	11 (7.9)
			Valuing life	7 (4.9)
	Related to others	15 (10.5)	Changes in trust	8 (5.6)
			Valuing relationships	6 (4.2)
			Strengthened relationships	5 (3.5)
			Being able to help others	4 (2.8)
Reasons for bearing	Personal attributes	37 (26)	Beliefs and values	23 (16.2)
			Purposes	14 (9.8)
	Close persons	28 (20.1)	Family	25 (17.9)
			Friends	2 (1.4)
What helped to overcome	External resources	66 (47.8)	The support of close people	56 (39.4)
			Life changes or circumstances	6 (4.2)
			Psychotherapy	5 (3.5)
	Internal resources	28 (19.7)	Values and positive attitudes	22 (15.4)
			Disengagement coping	6 (4.2)

mature, in addition to other examples such as: “*Re-evaluating banal aspects of my daily life that previously occupied me, to acquire a more transcendental perspective in my life*” (Ona). Other reported benefits concerned their personal strength, specifically **becoming stronger** (9.8%). The following subcategory was **learnings and lessons** (7%), which implied the attaining of a certain type of wisdom and included responses such as “*I understood that death is part of the cycle of life.*” (Nico), and “*I learned that I should not stop being happy with what I like*” (Paul). Additionally, students often reported a greater **appreciation of life or perceiving the value of life** (4.9%), including responses such as “*valuing my life and the lives of others more*” (Inés), “*valuing life on a daily basis*” (Uri), and “*I can appreciate being here right now.*” (Lupe). The last and least frequently mentioned subcategory was **changes in trust** (5.6%). These were related to a sensation or attitude of mistrust towards others. Some clearly manifested a loss of trust, such as “*Trusting no one*” (Raúl) and “*Learning to trust only yourself.*” (Ada). Others comments were in the same vein but more attenuated, like “*Being more careful with who I trust.*” (Rosa).

The second category corresponded to the benefits **related to other people** (10.5%). Firstly, respondents referred to benefits concerning the importance they gave to those people close to them, showing a greater **appreciation of their relationships** (4.2%). For example, “*somehow I began to value the father figure more highly.*” (Maca). In other cases, individuals mentioned that their relationships changed positively, improving and gaining depth. The **strengthened relationships** subcategory (3.5%) included responses such as “*family union*” (Sol), and “*The relationship with my father*

*was strengthened and made me realize that I can count on him.*” (Mía). Few people reported the benefit of **being able to help others** (2.8%), including “*To be able to use my experience to help others*” (Uma) and “*Help others to know what to do in such cases and how to ask for help.*” (Vera).

The second question explored the possible worthy causes for enduring their suffering. Only 8 participants left this question unanswered, and more than half named a worthy cause (59.8%). Participants gave answers of 4.5 words on average, ranging from 1 to 16. Responses were grouped into two categories. The first one corresponded to **personal attributes** (26%) and included the subcategories of **beliefs and values** (16.2%), and **purposes** (9.8%). Diverse beliefs and values were mentioned, for example: “*The hope that things will change*” (Max) and “*Realizing that if I spend all my time trying to please others, I will never be me.*” (Laia). Purposes subcategory encompassed various objectives, such as “*finishing my studies*” (Lucy) and “*to demonstrate the strength I have*” (Deva). The second category corresponded to **close people** (20.4%), and contained the subcategories of **family** (16.2%) and **friends** (1.4%). Examples included “*Because of my family’s support*” (Lilia) and “*The understanding of others*” (Sofía).

In third place, concerning what helped individuals overcome their suffering, three persons reported that nothing did, and 33 did not answer this question. Average response to this question contained 5.1 words (range between 6 and 19). Based on the analysis, the answers were grouped into the categories of **external** and **internal resources**. On the one hand, external resources (47.1%) were the most frequently mentioned and comprised: the **support of close persons**



(39.4%), **life changes or circumstances** (4.2%), and **psychological therapy** (3.5%). A strong theme that emerged included different references to the support provided by close persons or by feelings raised by their relationship, such as belonging and responsibility towards them. Some illustrative answers are: "I had many people I could lean on" (María) and "having people I love and love me." (Sami). The other two subcategories that correspond to the category of external resources are life events and therapy. Concerning life events, participants mentioned situations such as "Starting college" (Paz) and "(...) the end of a loving relationship." (Luis). Finally, there was a subcategory that included therapy-related responses.

On the other hand, internal resources contained two subcategories, **positive values and attitudes** (15.4%) and **disengagement coping** (4.2%). The positive values subcategory was featured by an intrinsic motivation to overcome the suffering and keep going. Some examples are: "My desire to get ahead and overcome what happened" (Uma), "Self-esteem" (Sua), "Patience and determination to move forward" (Abel), "Knowing that I am still alive and there is a whole world to explore and understand" (Juan). Additionally, five participants mentioned reasons for bearing the suffering associated with **disengagement coping**, including "Distraction" (Jair), "Indifference" (Hugo), and "Brainwashing myself." (Raul).

### Meaningful Moments

Many participants shared at least one meaningful moment (69%). Two of them responded that their whole life has been meaningful, and thus did not fit into the described groups. This question elicited responses ranging from 3 to 107 words, with a mean of 13.27. Two overall categories emerged from this analysis: moments featuring joy or happiness and moments that indicate pain or suffering (Table 3). The first category, **positive-related meaningful moments** (83.8%), was described as satisfactory or pleasant and featured joy and happiness. These experiences were subcategorized into **close persons** (42.9%), **personal achievements** (36.6%), and **spiritual moments** (3.5%).

Respondents mentioned many moments of connection between a close person and family or friends, or romantic

relationships. Some examples of these are: "When my sister was born. My dad returning home (...)" (Tara) and "(...) conversations at 4 in the morning with my friends (...) they changed the course of my life to a happier life." (Juan). Moreover, the personal achievements subcategory included: "Having the first laudatory grade note in college." (Ariel), "Choosing my goals and setting myself on the path to achieving them" (Ilia), and "Living alone, being independent, because now I am more secure and I know that I can stand on my own two feet." (Pau). In addition, a few participants explained spiritual-related moments: "When I decided to become a Catholic, to choose and accept my religion." (Ida) and "(...) I experienced a self-realization about how beautiful existence can be and I contacted deeply with my inner child and their enormous capacity for wonder and naivety." (Emy).

The second category corresponded to moments of **pain or suffering** (25.3%). The most frequently mentioned moments in this category were experiences that implied **personal struggles** (9.8%), such as having severe illnesses, drug abuse problems, or, for example "when my partner left me, it helped me to grow up" (Flor). The next subcategory was **losing a loved one** (9.1%). Some participants mentioned that the experience of grief was the most meaningful. These descriptions often included a family member and an additional explanation of the value of the relationship with the dead person. For example:

A life-changing event was the loss of my mom. I thought that everything was finished. However, she always strived to see me as a successful person. That is why, even though she is not here, I want her to be very proud of me and to fulfil what I always wanted to see in me (Javi).

The last subcategory encompassed the experience of **family problems** (6.3%), such as parental divorces, separations, and family crisis.

### Self-Assessment of Life

This section addressed the question of how participants evaluate their lives in relation to the efforts they have made and what they have achieved, and explored if their description

**Table 3** Meaningful moment results

Theme	Categories	n (%)	Subcategories	n (%)
Meaningful moments	Joy or happiness	118 (84.8)	Close persons	61 (42.9)
			Personal achievements	52 (36.6)
			Spirituality	5 (3.5)
	Pain or suffering	36 (25.3)	Losing a loved person	13 (9.1)
			Personal struggles	14 (9.8)
			Family problems	9 (6.3)

**Table 4** Meaning in life assessment

Theme	Categories	n (%)	Subcategories	n (%)
Meaning in life	Presence of meaning	71 (51)	Meaningful life	60 (43.1)
	Type of purpose	90 (64.7)	Existential frustration	11 (7.7)
Career			43 (30.2)	
Related to others			20 (14)	
Personal growth			19 (13.6)	
Financial			8 (5.6)	

fitted the concept of **realization of meaning** (Table 4). Forty-one participants did not answer this question. However, within the responses, almost half (49.3%) contained information related to these concepts. Responses contained 38.5 words (range between 3 and 83). Most of the answers explicitly described the presence of the features of **meaning realization** (41.5%). Some examples of it are: “*I have been a blessed, loved woman who has achieved what she has set out to do*” (Nina), “*Personally, I consider myself a happy person because in spite of my problems, I have always been interested in going ahead in keeping my goals*” (Abril), and:

I have always struggled to have a balance between what I want to be, and what society says I have to be, and after many years, I managed to develop the ability to combine those two situations and I feel happy and fulfilled (Pía).

Although with a lower frequency, there were also answers that clearly corresponded to the group of **lack of meaning in life** (7.7%). For instance: “*I have not achieved much in my life, there is only failure and pain.*” (Javi), and “*I am a person who has been building their life based on mistakes. I would like it to be different.*” (Chuy).

Moreover, through an inductive analysis, we observed a variety of **types of goals**. In this case, the most frequent were **study-related** (30.2%). Individuals mentioned a variety of life objectives related to their academic or professional life, such as: “*I would like to be better in athletics and get a scholarship in college*” (Uri) and “*(I am) A young adult in search of a constant transdisciplinary academic preparation, where I use my creativity and passion for knowledge to generate new ideas and/or ways of seeing the world.*” (Noe).

The next subcategory of types of purpose was the group directed to the **well-being of other people** (14%). It included: “*I seek to help others because it makes me feel good and with a purpose*” (Susi), and “*I have always wanted to be useful and bring benefits to others, especially to those who suffer.*” (Dani). The third group comprised responses about goals focused on **personal development** (12.6%) and often included simple responses such as “*personal growth*” and diverse personal “*learnings*”. More elaborated examples are: “*(...) working on being a better person and I have achieved it*” (Jair) and “*my passion for knowledge to generate*

*new ideas and ways of seeing the world has involved an incessant effort always to be learning something or having experiences that keep my way of seeing the world as flexible and curious*”. (Noe). In last place, a few participants shared in their description **financial or economic goals** (5.6%). For example, “*Achieving an economic patrimony*” (Toby) and “*I do something I don’t like, but it gives me money.*” (Gael).

## Discussion

This study aimed to better understand the content of the following positive existential issues in trauma-exposed university students: the positive aspects of their suffering, their most meaningful moments, and their own life appraisal regarding meaning fulfilment. Thus, the discussion is structured according to the research objectives identified at the beginning. The results as a whole, endorse the fact that those young individuals do not only reflect on and struggle with these issues, but also they dig deeper and gain meaning from their experiences and circumstances (LeSueur, 2019; Lundvall, 2020).

What are the benefits of suffering caused by a traumatic experience? As for the positive aspects of suffering caused by trauma, the fact that the majority of participants named at least one benefit derived from it corroborates that these experiences can open up new possibilities beyond pain. In this study, the perceived benefits were mainly oriented towards the individual. This agrees with previous findings of positive personal transformation through suffering (Ellis et al., 2015; Taylor, 2012). In addition, some perceived trust disturbances (a common consequence of trauma; Matsakis, 1998) as individual benefits. It has been suggested that reduced trust may be a self-preservation mechanism to prevent individuals’ vulnerability to future trauma (Taft et al., 2016). However, if this distrust is pervasive, extreme, or chronic, it may cause further psychological and social dysfunction (Bell et al., 2018). Furthermore, people found benefits concerning diverse components of improved relationships indicating a positive impact of trauma on the interpersonal context. This substantiates the idea of the association of positive post-traumatic effects with the strengthening

of social relationships (Schilling, 2008; Schroevers et al., 2010).

Are there any worthy causes to endure post-traumatic suffering? The question about finding a worthy cause for enduring the suffering was the most frequently negatively answered. The observed responses that correspond to positive or adaptive were manifested through active coping strategies (taking action) than passive ones (avoidance; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2014). Moreover, the most frequent reasons for enduring suffering were personal features, which highlight the importance of pre-traumatic psychological attributes and their preventive role. As other findings suggest, the framework of beliefs can greatly influence a person's life and affect their well-being (Caprara & Steca, 2005; Poulin & Cohen-Silver, 2008). Additionally, results suggest that affective relationships help through the process of suffering and accompany the maintenance of hope and adaptation of the affected person (Duggleby, 2000).

What helps to cope with the suffering? Interpersonal relationships helped individuals to overcome their suffering, confirming the relevance of perceived social support to face difficulties associated with trauma (Robinaugh et al., 2011). Moreover, other respondents indicated their personal values and positive attitudes as a key factor. Interestingly, we also observed the presence of disengagement-related coping. Research suggests that these strategies are associated with the presence of higher guilt-related cognitions (Held et al., 2011) and that positive distraction and disengagement can be adaptive coping strategies for life stressors (Vaughn et al., 2020). Furthermore, the types of traumatic experience may explain the differences in participants' attributions, some relying more on their own abilities and some relying on relationships. More specifically, research suggests the type of trauma may be relevant for the kinds of coping strategies used (Vaughn-Coaxum et al., 2018) in addition to its possible positive repercussions, such as posttraumatic growth (Lowe et al., 2020).

Within the three positive aspects of suffering explored, there were more mentions of individual features in both the benefits and the reasons for enduring it. The process of meaning-making through suffering experiences, beyond rationalization or cognitive reframing, requires a transformation of values, beliefs, and goals (Wong, 2010). Conversely, regarding the factors that helped to overcome the suffering, the most common were external, specifically a close person. This suggests that the role of social support is more relevant concerning the active part of dealing with suffering (helping overcome it) in comparison to enduring or experiencing a benefit. These outcomes are relevant for formatting PTSD interventions.

What moments have the most meaningful life-impact? Moreover, most of the meaningful moments implied positive emotions such as joy and happiness. These results share a

number of similarities with components of the significant moments that have been studied previously. Our findings match the presence of purpose, significance, and spirituality but not coherence (van de Goor et al., 2020). Perhaps the latter issue might be more apparent in more mature individuals. Besides, moments of pain and suffering may go in line with the theme of facing the precarity of life (hard or demanding situations) and experiencing vulnerability (van de Goor et al., 2017). This confirms that difficult existential suffering experiences may be positively appraised and may imply an alternative sense.

It is interesting to note the important role of a close person and affective relationships. Firstly, friends and family were consistently mentioned throughout the topics studied. Secondly, the meaning and support provided by social relationships, especially concerning the family context, helped individuals to cope with suffering. Thirdly, taking into account both categories of significant moments, those involving loved persons were the most common. In addition to the importance of the social support mentioned above, these outcomes may be explained by a value present in Mexican culture. Familism, an individual's reflection of their attitudes toward family solidarity, integration, and support, and a commitment to family members (Sabogal et al., 1987), might be powerfully activated, both in emergency situations and in less pressing moments of daily life (Rabell & D'Aubeterre, 2009). This trait may imply similar values and attitudes towards other close affective relationships. Thus, it suggests that the sense of connectedness offered by relationships is especially important for perceiving meaning or getting closer to existential fulfillment (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016).

How do individuals self-perceive regarding what they have wanted to be and what they have worked for, in contrast to what they have achieved? Can it be interpreted through the presence of meaning fulfillment or existential frustration? Finally, outcomes on an individuals' perspective of their own life and realization of meaning, were, in general, oriented towards a meaningful life. This denotes a deep and reflective capacity, conscience, or maturity in young people. The primary topics included personal achievements such as academic and professional goals, coherent with the participants' sociodemographic profile and their current implication in university studies. Additionally, answers that indicated a lack of meaning in life also denoted an existential suffering, which may begin with an experience of groundlessness and disconnection (Bruce et al., 2011). Finally, we observed a relatively low response to this issue. A tentative explanation may be the participants' attitudes towards this issue. Specifically, a defensive attitude, self-deception, and busyness are three common reasons for reluctance to the question or issue of meaning in life (Wong, 2015).



Although the aim of this research was to explore positive existential aspects, it is essential to take into account that negative responses to the questions were also considerably frequent. In particular, several participants did not find positive aspects to their suffering or reasons to cope with it. These results reflect the possible diversity of individual responses to posttraumatic stress and also show that the positive experience or outlook towards these issues is not universal. Moreover, this may suggest the presence of other dysfunctional posttraumatic factors involved such as stigma and its implications (Schomerus et al., 2021), the development of psychological symptoms (Kessler et al., 2017), among other aspects.

Beyond all of the above, it is important to emphasize that existential reflection may predict higher levels of adaptive coping (LeSueur, 2019). Moreover, actively recognizing young adults' existential concerns is important for preventing mental illness in the future (Lundvall et al., 2018). The present findings can be helpful in choosing and structuring further existential interventions in emerging adults.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are some potential limitations to this study. Firstly, as in any qualitative approach, there is a possible interpretation bias. Furthermore, some themes such as realization of meaning were frequently unanswered and results are derived from a much smaller sample. Secondly, the topics covered are profound and require a certain degree of processing and reflection, as well as a willingness to share. Thirdly, since this is a preliminary overview, future research could go much deeper with individual interviews or other types of assessments. This study is based on linear or horizontal qualitative exploration which fails to explain the complex associations between the studied variables, impeding the development of an explanatory model. Finally, data collection using the written format has some shortcomings, such as not being able to observe the non-verbal behaviour of the respondent, and not offering a more personalized exchange of information.

Due to the above-mentioned characteristics of the study, we make the following recommendations for future research. It would be interesting to widen the age range and to make repeated assessments to observe how these ideas evolve based on new experiences. Since there are gender differences in certain fundamental aspects of trauma, such as vulnerability to exposure and societal expectations of the victim, we recommend further comparative examinations. Additionally, future research should extend to other cultures to observe differences in family ties and belief systems. Finally, we recommend conducting interviews or accessing to other complementary forms of data collection that allow the capture of complex information on participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

### Conclusion

The present findings are valuable in contributing to the knowledge on positive existential issues in trauma-exposed university students. As a whole, and when observing these results through the view of positive existential psychology, findings indicate that these perceptions and experiences can contribute to the elaboration of a complementary positive alternative to the negative experience of trauma. It is important to actively construct meaning from traumatic experiences, making conscious their possible positive aspects, and personal growth in different areas of life. These results emphasize the relevance of building this process of adaptation at an early age so that certain functional coping strategies can be consolidated throughout the development of individuals. In addition, these findings provide information about the significance of personal characteristics, the psychological processes involved, affective relationships, and the social support of significant people as protective factors of the greater or lesser vulnerability that all people have to potentially traumatic situations.

**Author's Contribution** AA and BC analysed and interpreted the data based on content areas, reaching a consensus on classifications. AA was a major contributor to writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Code Availability** Not applicable.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Ethics Approval** This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics and Biosafety Committee of University of Girona (#CEBRU0018-2020).

**Consent to Participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Consent for Publication** Not applicable.

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