PATIENT RESOURCE

Feeling Adrift

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Questioning what it all means is not a sign that something is wrong with you.

Many people, especially in their twenties and thirties, reach a point where the things that used to matter feel far away and the future feels unclear. This is common, it has been studied, and there are gentle ways to find your footing again.

WHAT IS GOING ON

When meaning goes quiet

Sometimes low mood is not depression. It can be a loss of meaning: a sense of being stuck, unsure what to move toward, and asking what any of it is for. This experience has a name, demoralization, and the World Health Organization now lists it in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).

Demoralization and depression can look alike, and they can happen together, but they are not the same. Depression usually dulls the ability to feel pleasure, so things you once enjoyed stop feeling good. With demoralization you can often still enjoy a meal, a laugh, or time with a friend. What dominates instead is the feeling of being stuck: wanting things to change but not knowing how to begin.

It shows up often in early adulthood. Study, work, relationships and other big changes can all raise the question of what matters, and that questioning is a normal part of working it out.

None of this means something is wrong with you. A period of questioning can be uncomfortable, and it can also be the start of working out what you want your life to be about.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Across large studies, a stronger sense of meaning is associated with lower depression, and in young people with fewer suicidal thoughts. Searching for meaning is not the problem in itself; it tends to feel harder when it comes with a sense of having little control.

BE PATIENT WITH THE PROCESS

Finding your footing is rarely a single decision. It usually returns in small steps, as you reconnect with what matters and act on the parts you can influence.

WHAT YOU CAN TRY

Small steps back toward meaning

You do not need all the answers to begin. These questions can help you notice what still matters.

Ask yourself:

1. **What used to matter to you** that feels out of reach right now?
2. If nothing else changed, **what would you still want to move toward?**
3. **What is one small thing** that is genuinely within your control this week?

THE GOAL

To take one small, values-based step, and let a sense of direction build from there. **Action often comes before motivation.**

Other things that may help:

- **Notice the difference.** Are you low and unable to enjoy things, or stuck and unsure how to move? They call for different kinds of support.
- **Watch the Stoicism trap.** Some popular versions suggest feeling less and saying nothing. Research links this kind of emotional shutdown with lower wellbeing, not more strength.
- **Reconnect with people.** Meaning is often rebuilt in relationships. One small contact this week counts.
- **Focus on what you can influence.** Separating what is in your control from what is not can ease the sense of being stuck.
- **Talk it through.** A psychologist can help you explore meaning and direction. Your GP can discuss a Mental Health Treatment Plan.
- **Go gently on yourself.** A flat, searching stretch is not a personal failing. The patience you would offer a friend makes the next step easier.

M Meaning

Reconnect with what matters to you, even in small ways. A sense of direction tends to follow action rather than arrive before it.

A Agency

Focus on the parts of your situation you can influence. Small, doable steps loosen the feeling of being stuck.

C Connection

You do not have to work this out alone. Relationships and support are where meaning is often rebuilt.

If you need support now

LIFELINE
13 11 14
24 hours, crisis support

BEYOND BLUE
1300 22 4636
24 hours, anxiety and depression

MINDSPOT
1800 61 44 34
Free assessment and treatment

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, please contact Lifeline (13 11 14) or attend your nearest emergency department.

This resource is for general information only. It does not constitute clinical advice and is not a substitute for consultation with a registered health professional. Please speak with your GP or a registered psychologist about what is right for your situation.

References: de Figueiredo, J. M. (2026). The demoralization construct in clinical practice and research. Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 87(2). · World Health Organization. (2024). ICD-11, MB22.2 Demoralization. · Ouyang, W.-h., et al. (2025). Meaning in life and depression: A three-level meta-analysis. Journal of Affective Disorders. · Li, S., et al. (2024). Meaning in life and suicidal ideation in young people. Children and Youth Services Review, 158. · He, X.-X., et al. (2023). Meaning in life and psychological distress: A meta-analysis. Journal of Research in Personality, 104. · Karl, J. A., et al. (2022). Misunderstood Stoicism. Journal of Happiness Studies, 23(7).

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Medicare rebates available with a Mental Health Treatment Plan and referral

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