

Meaning in Life and Meaningful Work as Resources Against Burnout in Social Work and Helping Professions: A Systematic Review with Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract: Burnout is widespread in social work and other helping professions, and meaning has been proposed as a personal resource relevant to its prevention. This systematic review synthesised quantitative evidence on the association between meaning (meaning in life, purpose in life, meaningful work) and burnout among practising helping professionals. Following PRISMA 2020, PubMed and supplementary sources wer4e searched for studies published between 2010 and November 2026. Sixty eligible studies (61 reports; more than 28,000 participants) were included, appraised with the JBI checklist, and synthesised through direction-based vote counting and exploratory random-effects pooling of correlations. In 50 of 52 studies with an interpretable direction, higher meaning was associated with lower burnout (sign test $p < .001$). The pooled correlation was moderate ($r = -.37$, 95% CI [−.45, −.29], $k = 10$) after exclusion of one positive outlier, with substantial heterogeneity. Presence of meaning was associated with lower burnout, whereas search for meaning was associated with higher burnout. Associations often attenuated once work engagement or calling was modelled, and two studies reported positive associations. Evidence was predominantly cross-sectional, and only seven studies sampled social workers. Meaning is a consistent correlate of lower burnout but cannot replace structural measures addressing workload and organisational demands.

Keywords: *Meaning in Life, Meaningful Work, Burnout, Social Work, Systematic Review*

1. Introduction

It is late afternoon in a municipal child-protection office. A social worker closes the last case file of the day, a placement decision taken under time pressure, with incomplete information and against the wishes of a distressed mother. The caseload has grown again, the documentation backlog has not shrunk, and the next home visit is scheduled for the following morning. Asked why she remains in the profession, she does not mention salary, status or working conditions. She says that the work still matters to her: that, on good days, she can see why she does it. This brief scene captures the question at the centre of the present review. In professions that are defined by sustained exposure to human suffering, the experience that one's work and one's life are meaningful is widely invoked as a source of endurance. Whether this intuition is supported by systematic quantitative evidence, and under which conditions it holds, has not yet been established across the helping professions.

Burnout has become one of the most intensively studied occupational health phenomena in the human services. It is understood as a psychological syndrome that emerges as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors at work and is characterised by exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Social work occupies a particular position within this literature. Early reviews documented high levels of occupational stress and burnout among social workers (Lloyd et al., 2002), and longitudinal evidence has linked burnout in this group with subsequent physical health complaints over a three-year period (Kim et al., 2011). In child protection, a systematic review identified an interplay of individual and organisational factors in the development of resilience and burnout (McFadden et al., 2015), and a recent meta-analysis of social-services workers documented a substantial pooled prevalence of burnout (Giménez-Bertomeu et al., 2024). Comparable patterns are reported for nursing, medicine, psychotherapy, counselling and teaching, all of which share the defining feature of emotionally demanding, relationship-based work with people in need.

Research on burnout has long been dominated by the analysis of job demands, such as workload, role conflict and emotional labour, and of organisational resources, such as autonomy, supervision and social support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Personal resources have received growing attention, and among them meaning occupies a distinctive place. Meaning is not merely another positive affective state; it refers to the cognitive and motivational sense that one's life and work are coherent, purposeful and significant (Martela & Steger, 2016). In the tradition of logotherapy, the will to meaning is regarded as a primary human motivation that can be realised through work, through relationships and through the

attitude one adopts towards unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 2006). Contemporary meaning-centred psychology has elaborated these ideas into an integrative research programme (Wong, 2012), and organisational psychology has developed parallel constructs of meaningful work and work meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012).

The empirical literature linking meaning and burnout has expanded rapidly, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, but it remains fragmented across disciplines. Studies of physicians are published in medical journals, studies of nurses in nursing journals, studies of teachers in educational journals, and studies of social workers in social work and management journals. They use different constructs (global meaning in life, purpose in life, meaningful work, meaning in patient care), different instruments, and different analytic strategies. Existing syntheses have addressed adjacent questions: the correlates of meaningful work in general working populations (Allan et al., 2019), the benefits of meaning-centred therapies for patients (Vos & Vitali, 2018), and the prevalence of burnout among social workers (Giménez-Bertomeu et al., 2024). To the best of current knowledge, no systematic review has integrated the evidence on meaning in life and meaningful work in relation to burnout across the helping professions with an explicit focus on implications for social work.

This gap matters for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it is unclear whether meaning functions as a general correlate of lower burnout, whether its associations are specific to particular dimensions of burnout or to particular forms of meaning, and whether meaning can become a liability when it is accompanied by overcommitment or exploited by organisations. Practically, social work organisations, supervisors and educators increasingly draw on meaning-oriented approaches, from reflective supervision to values-based training, without a consolidated evidence base. The present review therefore addresses four research questions. First, what is the direction and consistency of the association between meaning and burnout among practising helping professionals (RQ1)? Second, what is the approximate magnitude of this association (RQ2)? Third, do the associations differ between forms of meaning, in particular between presence of and search for meaning and between global and work-specific meaning (RQ3)? Fourth, under which conditions, as indicated by moderation analyses, longitudinal designs and intervention studies, do these associations strengthen, weaken or reverse (RQ4)? On this basis, implications for social work practice, supervision, organisational development and professional education are derived.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *Burnout in the Helping Professions*

The multidimensional conception of burnout distinguishes an energetic component (exhaustion), an interpersonal component (cynicism or depersonalisation) and a self-evaluative component (reduced professional efficacy or accomplishment) (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the helping professions, these components acquire a specific texture. Exhaustion is closely tied to emotional labour and to the repeated encounter with distress, trauma and loss. Depersonalisation describes a distancing from clients that may initially serve as a self-protective strategy but undermines the relational core of helping work. Reduced efficacy reflects the experience that one's efforts are ineffective, a perception that is often reinforced in fields where outcomes are slow, uncertain and dependent on structural conditions outside professional control. Closely related, though conceptually distinct, is compassion fatigue, which describes the cost of caring for people who suffer and comprises secondary traumatic stress alongside burnout (Figley, 1995). Because several studies in this field operationalise burnout through the burnout or compassion fatigue components of professional quality of life, both were considered relevant outcomes in the present review.

2.2 *Meaning in Life and Meaningful Work*

Meaning in life is commonly defined through three facets: coherence, the sense that one's life makes sense; purpose, the sense of being directed by valued goals; and significance, the sense that one's life matters (Martela & Steger, 2016). A widely used operationalisation distinguishes the presence of meaning, the degree to which people experience their lives as meaningful, from the search for meaning, the degree to which they are actively seeking it (Steger et al., 2006). The two dimensions are only weakly related and can show divergent correlates, with presence typically associated with well-being and search sometimes associated with distress. Purpose in life, measured with instruments rooted in logotherapy such as the Purpose in Life test, represents an older but conceptually overlapping tradition (Frankl, 2006).

Meaningful work refers to the subjective experience that one's work is significant and positive in valence, contributes to broader meaning in life and serves a greater good (Steger et al., 2012). Theoretical integrations of the meaning-of-work literature identify the self, others, the work context and spiritual life as sources of meaning, and distinguish processes of self-connection, individuation, contribution and unification (Rosso et al., 2010). Meta-analytic evidence from general working populations links meaningful work with a broad range of favourable work attitudes and well-being indicators, most strongly with work engagement,

organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019). Global meaning in life and work-specific meaning are related but not interchangeable: a social worker may experience her work as deeply meaningful while struggling to sustain a sense of meaning in other life domains, or the reverse. The present review therefore examines both forms and compares their associations with burnout.

2.3 *Meaning as a Personal Resource: Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources*

The job demands–resources (JD-R) framework provides the most frequently used lens for locating meaning within the burnout literature. In this framework, job demands are associated with exhaustion through a health-impairment process, whereas job and personal resources are associated with engagement through a motivational process; resources may additionally attenuate the association between demands and strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Meaning fits the definition of a personal resource, and meaningful work can be conceptualised as a psychological state that arises from task significance, autonomy and prosocial contribution. Conservation of resources (COR) theory adds a dynamic perspective. It posits that people strive to obtain, retain and protect resources, that resource loss is psychologically more salient than resource gain, and that resources tend to cluster in caravans and to accumulate in gain or loss spirals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). From this perspective, meaning may be both a resource that is associated with lower burnout and a resource that is depleted by chronic overload, which implies that cross-sectional associations cannot be interpreted in one direction only.

2.4 *Meaning-Making Under Adversity*

The meaning-making model distinguishes global meaning, comprising beliefs, goals and a subjective sense of meaning, from situational meaning, the appraisal of specific events (Park, 2010). Distress is assumed to arise when appraised situations are discrepant with global meaning and meaning-making efforts aim to reduce this discrepancy, either by changing the appraisal of the situation or by revising global beliefs and goals. Helping professionals encounter such discrepancies routinely: a child who cannot be protected, a patient who dies despite all efforts, a client whose situation deteriorates because of policies the professional cannot change. In this view, meaning is not only a stable trait-like resource but an ongoing process, and both its presence and the struggle to restore it may be related to burnout. The logotherapeutic emphasis on attitudinal values, the meaning that can be found in the stance taken towards unavoidable suffering, provides a complementary perspective that is

particularly relevant to professions that confront suffering they cannot remove (Frankl, 2006; Wong, 2012).

2.5 *The Double-Edged Character of Meaning*

A final theoretical consideration concerns the possibility that meaning is not uniformly beneficial. Ethnographic and survey research on deeply meaningful occupations has described meaningful work as a double-edged sword: a strong sense of calling is associated with occupational identification and perceived significance, but also with a sense of moral duty, a willingness to sacrifice pay and personal time, and heightened vigilance towards organisational management (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). In the helping professions, where intrinsic motivation is high and resources are often scarce, meaning may thus coexist with overcommitment and may be implicitly relied upon by organisations to compensate for structural deficits. These considerations lead to the expectation that the meaning–burnout association is predominantly favourable but conditional, and that its strength may vary with job demands, job resources, career stage and the specific form of meaning assessed.

3. Method

3.1 *Design and Reporting Standards*

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) statement (Page et al., 2021). Because the included studies were too heterogeneous in constructs, instruments and analytic models for a comprehensive meta-analysis, the synthesis followed the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) reporting guideline (Campbell et al., 2020) and the guidance on narrative synthesis by Popay et al. (2006), complemented by an exploratory quantitative pooling of the subset of studies that reported comparable bivariate correlations. The review protocol was not prospectively registered; the eligibility criteria, search strategy and synthesis plan were specified before screening and are reported in full below and in Appendix A.

3.2 *Eligibility Criteria*

Eligibility criteria were defined according to population, exposure, outcome and study design. Eligible populations were practising members of helping or human-service professions, including social workers and social-care staff, nurses, physicians and residents, other healthcare and palliative-care staff, counsellors, psychologists and other mental-health or psychosocial professionals, teachers and educators, and clergy engaged in pastoral care.

Samples of students or trainees were excluded, as were populations without a primary client-oriented helping role, such as police, military, retail or administrative staff. Mixed samples were eligible if helping professionals constituted the clear majority or if results for this subgroup were reported separately. The exposure was an explicitly measured meaning construct, including meaning in life (presence or search), purpose in life, meaningful work or work meaningfulness, meaning derived from specific professional activities, or a meaning-centred intervention directed at the professionals themselves. Constructs that are related to but distinct from meaning, such as calling, work engagement or spirituality, were not eligible on their own. The outcome was burnout or one of its core dimensions, or the burnout or compassion fatigue component of professional quality of life. Eligible designs were quantitative primary studies (cross-sectional, repeated cross-sectional, longitudinal, quasi-experimental or randomised) that reported a statistical association between meaning and burnout or an intervention effect on burnout. Peer-reviewed articles published in English between January 2010, and November 2026 were eligible. Reviews, protocols, commentaries, conference abstracts and purely qualitative studies were excluded.

3.3 *Information Sources and Search Strategy*

The primary information source was PubMed/MEDLINE, searched on 2 November 2026 with a title/abstract strategy that combined meaning-related terms (meaning in life, meaningful work, work meaningfulness, purpose in life, sense of meaning, meaning of work) with burnout-related terms (burnout, emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue), limited to publications from 2010 onwards. Because a substantial proportion of social work, counselling and education research is not indexed in MEDLINE, a structured supplementary search was conducted in Google Scholar, the Crossref metadata service and publisher platforms, using ten predefined query combinations with an emphasis on social work, counselling, teaching and meaning-centred interventions. Backward citation tracking of key studies was performed to identify further records. The complete search strings are reported in Appendix A.

3.4 *Study Selection*

All records were screened in two stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were assessed against the eligibility criteria, and a single primary reason for exclusion was recorded for each excluded record. In the second stage, potentially eligible reports were assessed in full where full texts were accessible, otherwise on the basis of the complete abstract and published tables. Screening was supported by AI-assisted pre-screening; all eligibility decisions were subsequently checked by the author, and borderline cases, such as studies measuring calling rather than meaning or samples with limited client contact, were

resolved through explicit decision rules recorded in the extraction file. Records retrieved through both search arms were de-duplicated, and multiple reports from the same cohort were treated as a single study.

3.5 *Data Extraction*

A standardised extraction form captured bibliographic details, country, profession, sample size, design, meaning construct and instrument, burnout instrument, analytic approach, and all reported statistics describing the meaning–burnout association, including correlation coefficients, standardised and unstandardised regression coefficients, odds ratios, explained variance and interaction terms. The role assigned to meaning in the primary analysis (correlate, mediator, moderator or intervention target) was recorded. Where abstracts and full texts diverged, values from full texts were preferred. Where only the direction of an association was reported, this was recorded as such, and no values were imputed.

3.6 *Risk of Bias Assessment*

Methodological quality was appraised with criteria derived from the JBI critical appraisal checklist for analytical cross-sectional studies (Moola et al., 2020), adapted for longitudinal and intervention designs. The criteria addressed the definition of the sample and setting, the validity and reliability of the meaning and burnout measures, the identification of and control for confounding factors, and the appropriateness of the statistical analysis. Each study was rated as having a low, moderate or high risk of bias. Particular attention was paid to the use of single-item or ad hoc measures, convenience sampling, low response rates and internal inconsistencies in reported statistics. Common-method variance was considered a shared limitation of all self-report designs (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.7 *Synthesis Methods*

The synthesis proceeded in three steps. First, studies were grouped by occupational field and by form of meaning (global meaning in life or purpose versus work-specific meaning), and the direction of the meaning–burnout association was coded for each study as favourable (higher meaning associated with lower burnout), unfavourable (higher meaning associated with higher burnout), mixed (divergent directions for different meaning constructs), conditional (association reported only within moderation analyses), null (no association and no direction reported) or indeterminate (direction not extractable). In accordance with the SWiM guideline, direction-based vote counting was used rather than counting statistically significant results, and a two-sided sign test was applied to studies with an interpretable direction (Campbell et al., 2020). Second, bivariate Pearson correlations between the presence of meaning or meaningful work and burnout were pooled in an

exploratory random-effects model. One coefficient per independent sample was used; where several burnout dimensions were reported, their correlations were averaged. Correlations were transformed to Fisher's *z*, pooled with the DerSimonian–Laird estimator and back-transformed. Heterogeneity was quantified with Q, I^2 and τ^2, and a 95% prediction interval was calculated. Sensitivity analyses excluded an outlying sample with a positive association, studies rated as high risk of bias, and studies measuring only one burnout dimension or compassion fatigue. Analyses were conducted in Python with SciPy. Third, findings from moderation analyses, longitudinal designs and intervention studies were synthesised narratively to address the conditions under which associations vary. Because the large majority of studies were cross-sectional, all associations are reported as such; where primary studies framed meaning as a mediator, these models are described as indicating shared variance rather than demonstrating mediation.

4. Results

4.1 *Study Selection*

The PubMed search yielded 215 records, of which 157 were excluded at title and abstract screening, most frequently because of an ineligible population (n = 37), a non-empirical publication type (n = 32) or the absence of a quantitative meaning–burnout association (n = 29). Of 58 reports assessed for eligibility, seven were excluded: four because the meaning–burnout association was not reported or not separable from other variables, one because the construct assessed was calling rather than meaning, one because the intervention targeted professionals' skills in addressing patients' meaninglessness rather than their own meaning, and one because the sample had limited direct client contact. The supplementary search identified approximately 134 records, of which 44 were assessed in detail and 13 met the eligibility criteria; three of these duplicated database reports, yielding ten additional reports. In total, 61 reports of 60 studies were included; two reports derived from the same cohort of frontline workers in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (Sumner & Kinsella, 2021; Sumner et al., 2026). The selection process is shown in Figure 1.

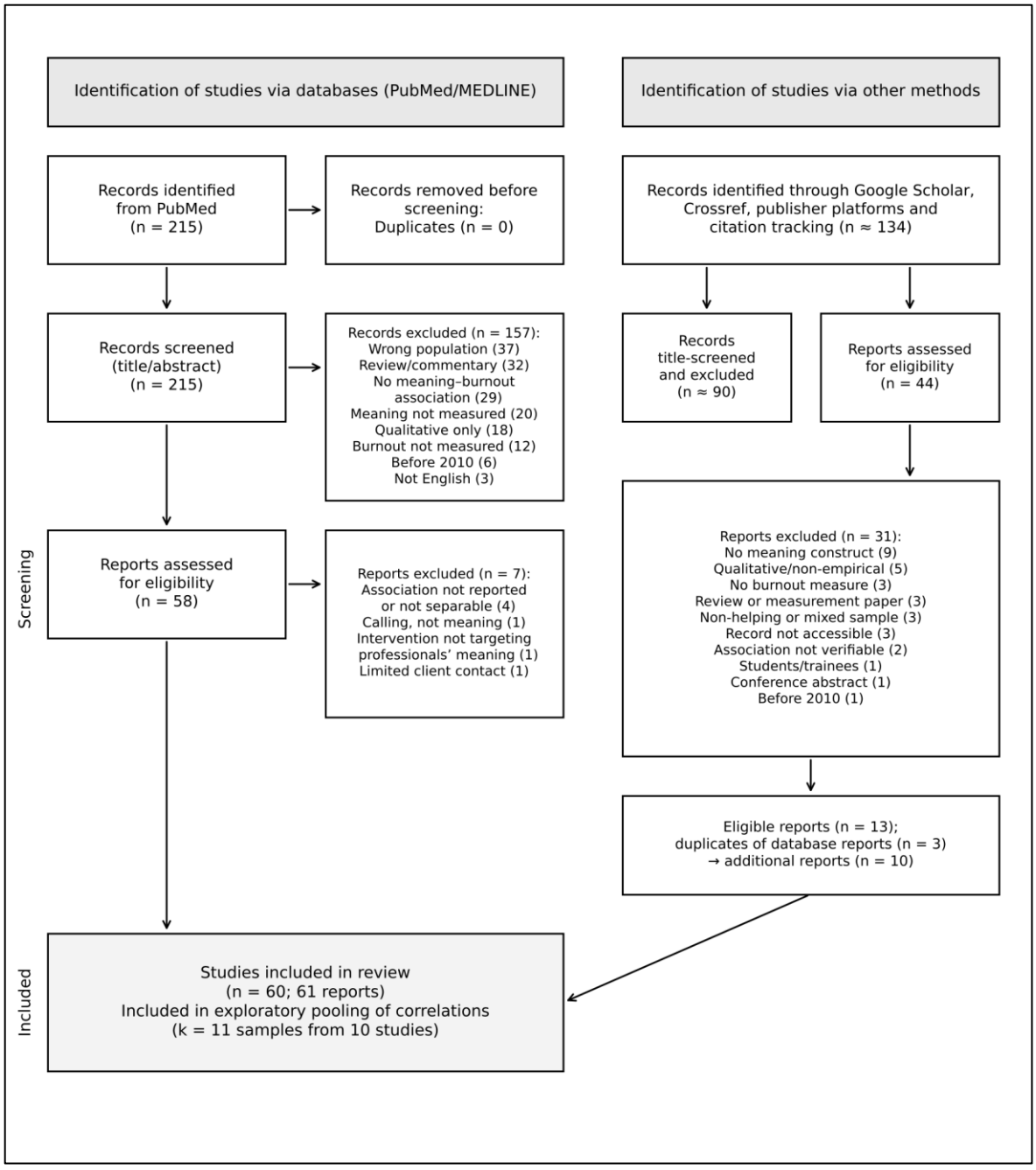

Figure 1. *PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection*

Note. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template (Page et al., 2021). The number of records identified through supplementary searching is approximate because results were screened in search-engine listings.

4.2 *Characteristics of Included Studies*

The characteristics of the included studies are summarised in Table 1. The studies were published between 2014 and 2026, and 39 of the 60 studies (65%) appeared in 2022 or later, reflecting a marked increase in research activity after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies were conducted in 23 countries, most frequently the United States (k = 14), Israel and Türkiye (k = 5 each) and China (k = 4); nineteen studies originated from

continental European countries, including two from Germany, and one study was international. Sample sizes ranged from 41 to 5,965 participants, with a combined total of more than 28,000 participants across the 56 studies that reported an exact sample size. Physicians and residents were the most frequently studied group (k = 15), followed by mixed health-care samples (k = 14), teachers (k = 9), nurses (k = 7), social workers and social-care staff (k = 7), mental-health and psychosocial professionals (k = 6) and clergy (k = 2).

Fifty-two studies used a cross-sectional design, two used repeated cross-sectional surveys, four followed participants longitudinally, one evaluated a quasi-experimental programme, and one used randomised allocation. In addition, one cohort contributed a longitudinal report with within-person analyses (Sumner et al., 2026). Thirty-eight studies assessed work-specific meaning, most often with the Work and Meaning Inventory or the meaning-of-work scale of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire; nineteen assessed global meaning in life or purpose in life, most often with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire or the Purpose in Life test; one assessed both; and two evaluated meaning-oriented interventions. Burnout was assessed with versions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory in the largest group of studies, followed by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, the Professional Quality of Life Scale, single-item measures and several further instruments.

Table 1

Characteristics, Principal Findings and Risk of Bias of the Included Studies (k = 60)

Study	Country	Sample; N	Design	Meaning; burnout measure	Principal finding	Dir.	RoB
Bao et al. (2026)	China	Physical-education teachers; 483	CS	Meaningful work scale; EE scale	r = .39 with EE (positive); conditional association weaker under high social support	U	Moderate
Barnett et al. (2019)	USA	Hospice nurses; 90	CS	Presence/search of meaning; burnout (n.r.)	Presence associated with lower burnout; search unrelated to burnout; shared variance with self-esteem	F	Moderate
Bayer et al. (2020)	USA	Paediatric residents; 119	CS	WAMI; single item	Adjusted OR = 0.80 [0.73, 0.89] per WAMI point	F	Moderate
Bayot et al. (2024)	Belgium	General practitioners; 301	CS	Meaning of work; OLBI	β = −.17 (exhaustion), −.31 (disengagement), adjusted	F	Low
Ben-Itzhak et al. (2015)	Israel	Emergency physicians; 70	CS	Single item; adapted MBI	B = −3.14 [−6.24, −0.05]	F	High
Bişog et al. (2026)	Romania	Teachers of children with disabilities; 175	CS	Meaningful work; burnout (n.r.)	Association shared variance with mindfulness; direction not extractable	I	High
Boone et al. (2026)	Belgium	Medical residents; 1,068	L	COPSOQ III; UBOS-C	Mixed models: β = −.10 (EE), −.12 (cynicism), +.15 (efficacy)	F	Low
Brafford et al. (2024)	USA	Resident physicians; n.r.	RCS	Meaningful work; burnout (n.r.)	Meaningful work associated with lower burnout in all three waves	F	Moderate
Busis et al. (2017)	USA	Neurologists; 1,671	CS	Meaningful-work item; validated burnout measure	Meaningful work associated with lower burnout odds (multivariable)	F	Moderate
Çelik & Tuzgöl	Türkiye	School teachers; 575	CS	MLQ; Burnout Measure	r = −.52; SEM β = −.28	F	Moderate

Dost (2025)							
Correia & Almeida (2020)	Portugal	Physicians and nurses; 497	CS	WAMI (2 items); OLBI	r = −.07 to −.36; adjusted β significant only for nurses' disengagement (−.15)	F	Moderate
Crea & Francis (2022)	Italy	Catholic priests and religious; 156	CS	PILS; FBI	Purpose associated with lower ministry exhaustion after controls	F	Moderate
Delafontaine et al. (2024)	Switzerland	Oncology/palliative staff; 103	CS	Empowerment meaning subscale; MBI-HSS	B = −.25 (EE), −.22 (DP), adjusted	F	Moderate
Echeverria et al. (2024)	Spain	Hospital and nursing-home staff; 108	CS	PIL; MBI-HSS	B = −.45 [−.70, −.19]; OR = 0.48	F	Moderate
Gama et al. (2014)	Portugal	Nurses; 360	CS	PIL; MBI	Purpose associated with lower EE and DP, higher PA (multivariable)	F	Low
Grigorescu et al. (2022)	Romania	Hospital staff; 959	CS	COPSOQ II; meaning-of-life items; CBI	Work meaning negative, life meaning positive (|r| < .20); work meaning moderated fear–burnout link	M	Moderate
Haar & Mowat (2021)	New Zealand	Nurses; 114	CS	Meaningful work; EE, cynicism	Meaningful work associated with lower cynicism	F	Moderate
Halady & Cook-Cottone (2023)	USA	Refugee-service professionals; 148	CS	Meaning in life; ProQOL composite	β = .22 with composite ProQOL; burnout not separable	I	High
Hamama-Raz et al. (2020)	Israel	Paediatric nurses; 138	CS	Meaning in work; burnout (n.r.)	Negative growth–burnout link stronger at higher meaning (moderation only)	C	Moderate
Hamama-Raz & Mazor (2023)	Israel	Eating-disorder ward staff; 200	CS	Personal Meaning in Patient Care; ProQOL-5	Negative association, significant only below ≈12 years' tenure	F	Moderate
He et al. (2023)	South Korea	Counsellors; 420	CS	K-WAMI; MBI	r = −.45; SEM β = −.08 (ns) once calling modelled	F	Moderate
Hooker et al.	USA	Family-medicine	CS	Meaning salience;	β = −.40	F	Moderate

(2019)		programme directors; 268		burnout (n.r.)			
Iqbal (2022)	Pakistan	Early-career doctors; n.r.	CS	PIL; MBI-HSS	Lower purpose among doctors with burnout; negative r with EE, DP	F	High
Itzick et al. (2018)	Israel	Social workers; 501	CS	Meaning in life; ProQOL	Burnout negatively associated with meaning (meaning as criterion)	F	Moderate
Ju et al. (2022)	USA	Resident physicians; 54	L	Single item; single item	b = −.29; ns when resources entered jointly	F	High
Kang et al. (2024)	Ukraine	Psychosocial support workers; 178	CS	Presence of meaning; burnout screen	Lower presence associated with higher burnout odds	F	Moderate
Kaplan et al. (2024)	USA	Internal-medicine residents; 311 / 328	QE	WAMI (ACGME tool); modified MBI items	Meaning rose among engaged residents; burnout rate unchanged	N	High
Klinefelter et al. (2022)	USA	Academic physicians; 428	CS (MM)	Meaning from teaching; burnout (n.r.)	Lower burnout only where teaching was most valued	C	Moderate
Kordsmeyer et al. (2022)	Germany	Social-firm supervisors; 114	CS	COPSOQ; COPSOQ burnout	β = −.17 (ns)	F	Moderate
Lavy (2022)	Israel	School teachers; 41	RCT	Meaning induction; Burnout Measure	Burnout fell after induction (2.63→1.82) vs control (2.34→2.42); $\eta p^2 = .45$	F	High
Lin et al. (2018)	Myanmar	House officers; 159	CS	COPSOQ II; single item	Not significant in multivariable model	N	High
Lucas-Mangas et al. (2022)	Spain	Teachers (active subsample); ≈212	CS	Ryff purpose; SBI	r = −.36	F	High
Lynch et al. (2026)	USA	Emergency clinicians; 113	L	5-item scale; Mini Z	T1–T2 r = −.47; demands–burnout slope significant only at low meaning	F	Moderate
Messias et al. (2021)	USA	Academic medical centre staff; 1,637	CS	WAMI-adapted; CBI	Burnout 13% (always meaningful) to 94% (never)	F	Moderate

Mette et al. (2020)	Germany	Social workers (refugee/homeless aid); 243	CS	COPSOQ I; COPSOQ burnout	β = −.14	F	Moderate
Møller et al. (2023)	Denmark	Vascular surgeons; 85	CS	Meaning at work; burnout (n.r.)	Higher burnout associated with lower meaning	F	Moderate
O'Higgins et al. (2022)	Spain	Health-care workers; 115	CS	PIL; MBI-HSS	β = −.45 (total burnout)	F	Moderate
Pal et al. (2026)	India	Hospital professionals; 373	CS	Meaningful work; burnout (n.r.)	Meaningful work shared variance in negative job crafting–burnout association	F	Moderate
Passmore et al. (2019)	USA	Child-abuse paediatric clinicians; 151	CS	WAMI; OLBI	Hope and meaning jointly negative (ΔR^2 = .07)	F	Moderate
Polatcan et al. (2025)	Türkiye	School teachers; 739	CS (ML)	Work meaningfulness; EE	Higher meaningfulness associated with lower EE	F	Moderate
Popucza (2026)	Sweden	Health, care and human-service staff; 1,506	CS	COPSOQ III; OLBI	β = −.53 (disengagement), −.20 (exhaustion); amplifying, not buffering, interaction	F	Low
Rasmussen et al. (2015)	International	Psychosocial oncology clinicians; 417	CS	WAMI; MBI-HSS	β = −.15 (EE); DP odds 9% lower per point	F	Low
Santen et al. (2024)	USA	Surgeons and advanced practice providers; ≈72	CS	Meaningful-work item; Mini Z	Low meaningful work associated with burnout	F	High
Savu et al. (2023)	Romania	Health-care workers; 304	RCS	WAMI; MBI	r = −.34	F	High

Sciotto et al. (2025)	Italy	Palliative-care workers; 236	CS	QEEW 2.0; ProQOL CF	r = −.28; β = −.17	F	Moderate
She & Hu (2026)	China	Preschool teachers; 486	CS	Work Meaning Scale; MBI-EE	r = −.55; β = −.31	F	Low
Singer et al. (2020)	n.r.	Protective-services social workers; 292	CS	Purpose in life; burnout (n.r.)	Higher purpose associated with lower burnout, VT and STS (11–21% variance)	F	Moderate
Slovin et al. (2024)	USA	Paediatric faculty; 248	CS	Career fit; MBI	r = −.29	F	Moderate
Soylu et al. (2026)	Türkiye	Psychiatrists; 233	CS	MLQ; MBI	Presence β = −.52; search β = +.27	F	Moderate
Sozer-Boz et al. (2024)	Türkiye	Special-education teachers; 258	CS (LPA)	Meaningful work; MBI	High meaningful work associated with burnout-profile membership (OR = 5.48)	U	Moderate
Sumner & Kinsella (2021); Sumner et al. (2026)	UK & Ireland	Frontline workers (≈80% health/social care); 1,305	CS + L	MLQ; BBI	Presence β = −.30, search β = +.15; within-person interplay (2026 report)	F	Moderate
Suyatno et al. (2022)	Indonesia	School teachers; 304	CS	WAMI-adapted; Dorman items	Sign not interpretable (reverse scoring, table errors)	I	High
Tan et al. (2019)	n.r.	Social workers; 223	CS	Meaningful work; burnout (n.r.)	Negative unique association with one dimension; shared variance with PsyCap	F	Moderate
Tan & Yeap (2021)	New Zealand	Social workers; 530	CS	WAMI; MBI	Unique β = −.07 to −.12 (only reduced PA significant); shared variance with engagement	F	Moderate
Tanrıverdi & Doğan (2026)	Türkiye	Nurses; 252	CS	Meaning in Life Scale; CF Short Scale	B = −.60	F	Moderate
Van Simaeys et al. (2025)	Belgium	Nurses (≤10 years); 375	CS	MLQ; BAT	Presence r = −.36; search r = +.12	F	Low
Van der Heijden et	Netherlands	Nurses; 1,187	L (T1	COPSOQ; CBI	β = −.08 (<40 years), −.04 (≥40 years)	F	Moderate

al. (2019)			paths)				
Village & Francis (2026)	UK	Clergy; 505	CS	PILS; FBI	Lowest purpose in high-exhaustion/low-satisfaction type	F	Moderate
Wang et al. (2025)	China	Social workers; 5,965	CS	Ad hoc items; MBI-GS efficacy	Professional efficacy positively associated with meaningfulness (coefficient 0.28)	F	Moderate
Zhang et al. (2021)	China	Hotline counsellors; 712	CS	MLQ; ProQOL-5 CF	Meaning highest-ranked correlate of compassion fatigue; low meaning characterised CF	F	Moderate

Note. N = analysed sample; n.r. = not reported in accessible record. Design: CS = cross-sectional; L = longitudinal; RCS = repeated cross-sectional; QE = quasi-experimental; RCT = randomised allocation; ML = multilevel; MM = mixed methods; LPA = latent profile analysis. Measures: BAT = Burnout Assessment Tool; BBI = Bergen Burnout Inventory; CBI = Copenhagen Burnout Inventory; CF = compassion fatigue; COPSOQ = Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (meaning-of-work scale); EE = emotional exhaustion; DP = depersonalisation; PA = personal accomplishment; FBI = Francis Burnout Inventory; MBI(-HSS/-GS) = Maslach Burnout Inventory (Human Services/General Survey); MLQ = Meaning in Life Questionnaire; OLBI = Oldenburg Burnout Inventory; PIL = Purpose in Life test; PILS = Purpose in Life Scale; ProQOL = Professional Quality of Life Scale; QEEW = Questionnaire on the Experience and Evaluation of Work; SBI = Spanish Burnout Inventory; UBOS-C = Utrecht Burnout Scale for contact professions; WAMI = Work and Meaning Inventory. Dir. = direction of the meaning–burnout association: F = favourable (higher meaning associated with lower burnout); U = unfavourable; M = mixed; C = conditional (moderation only); N = null; I = indeterminate. RoB = risk of bias (adapted JBI criteria). VT = vicarious trauma; STS = secondary traumatic stress; PsyCap = psychological capital; ns = not significant. Coefficients are reproduced as reported in the primary studies; most designs are cross-sectional and do not permit causal inference.

4.3 *Risk of Bias*

Seven studies were rated as having a low risk of bias, 41 as moderate and 12 as high. Low ratings were assigned to studies combining validated multi-item instruments with large or multi-site samples and adjustment for relevant job demands and resources (e.g., Bayot et al., 2024; Boone et al., 2026; Gama et al., 2014; Popucza, 2026; Rasmussen et al., 2015; She & Hu, 2026; Van Simaeys et al., 2025). The most common sources of concern were convenience sampling through professional networks or social media, low or unreported response rates, single-item or ad hoc measures of meaning or burnout, and limited control for confounding variables. High ratings were assigned, among others, to studies with very small samples or substantial attrition (Ju et al., 2022; Lavy, 2022), unclear scoring direction or internal inconsistencies in reported coefficients (Suyatno et al., 2022), and uncontrolled pre–post evaluations (Kaplan et al., 2024). All studies relied exclusively on self-report, so common-method variance represents a shared limitation.

4.4 *Direction and Consistency of the Association (RQ1)*

Table 2 summarises the direction of the meaning–burnout association by occupational group. In 50 studies, higher meaning was associated with lower burnout; in two studies, higher meaning was associated with higher burnout; one study reported divergent directions for work-specific and global meaning; two reported associations only within moderation analyses; two found no association; and in three the direction could not be extracted. Among the 52 studies with an interpretable direction, 50 (96%) reported a favourable association, which is far more than expected under the null hypothesis of no systematic direction (two-sided sign test, $p < .001$). The favourable pattern was observed in every occupational group. It was most uniform among social workers and social-care staff, nurses and mixed health-care samples, and least uniform among teachers, where both unfavourable associations were found.

Table 2. *Direction of the Meaning–Burnout Association and Risk of Bias by Occupational Group*

Occupational group	*k*	Favourable	Unfavourable	Mixed / conditional	Null / indeterminate	RoB low / moderate / high
Social work and social care	7	7	0	0	0	0 / 7 / 0
Nurses	7	6	0	1	0	2 / 5 / 0
Physicians and	15	12	0	1	2	2 / 7 / 6

residents						
Mixed health-care samples	14	13	0	1	0	1 / 12 / 1
Mental-health and psychosocial professionals	6	5	0	0	1	1 / 4 / 1
Teachers	9	5	2	0	2	1 / 4 / 4
Clergy	2	2	0	0	0	0 / 2 / 0
Total	60	50	2	3	5	7 / 41 / 12

Note. k = number of studies. Favourable = higher meaning associated with lower burnout. Among the 52 studies with an interpretable direction, 50 were favourable (two-sided sign test, $p < .001$). Two reports from one British–Irish cohort are counted as one study. RoB = risk of bias.

The consistency of direction was accompanied by variability in statistical significance. In several multivariable models, the association between meaning and burnout was small or non-significant once other resources were controlled. In supervisors of social firms, for example, the coefficient for meaning of work was negative but non-significant after adjustment (β = −.17; Kordsmeyer et al., 2022), and among junior doctors in Myanmar, meaning of work was not retained in the final model (Lin et al., 2018). The favourable direction of these coefficients indicates that the evidence is better described as consistent in sign than as uniformly strong.

4.5 *Magnitude of the Association (RQ2)*

Eleven independent samples from ten studies reported bivariate correlations between the presence of meaning or meaningful work and burnout (Table 3). Across all eleven samples (N = 4,794), the pooled correlation was $r = -.31$ (95% CI [−.46, −.14]), with very high heterogeneity ($Q = 361.34$, $p < .001$; $I^2 = 97.2\%$) that was attributable largely to one sample of physical-education teachers in border regions of China, in which meaningful work was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion (r = .39; Bao et al., 2026). After exclusion of this sample, the pooled correlation was $r = -.37$ (95% CI [−.45, −.29], k = 10, N = 4,311), with substantial but reduced heterogeneity ($I^2 = 88.7\%$, $\tau^2 = 0.020$) and a 95% prediction interval from −.63 to −.05. The estimate was robust to the additional exclusion of a study rated as high risk of bias ($r = -.38$, 95% CI [−.46, −.29]) and of studies assessing only emotional exhaustion or compassion fatigue ($r = -.36$, 95% CI [−.44, −.28]). Individual correlations ranged from −.17 to −.55 in the remaining samples. Standardised regression coefficients from multivariable models were generally smaller, typically between −.10 and −.30, with larger values reported for presence of meaning among psychiatrists (β = −.52;

Soylu et al., 2026) and for meaning of work in relation to disengagement among Swedish health, care and human-service staff (β = −.53; Popucza, 2026). Taken together, the bivariate association is of moderate size, but the prediction interval indicates that in a new setting it may range from strong to negligible.

Table 3. *Bivariate Correlations Between Meaning and Burnout and Exploratory Random-Effects Pooling*

Study / sample	Meaning; burnout measure	*N*	*r* [95% CI]
She & Hu, 2026	Meaning of work; MBI-EE	486	−.55
Çelik & Tuzgöl Dost, 2025	Meaning in life (MLQ); Burnout Measure	575	−.52
Lynch et al., 2026	Meaningful work T1; burnout T2 (Mini Z)	113	−.47
He et al., 2023	Meaning of work (K-WAMI); MBI total	420	−.45
Van Simaeys et al., 2025	Presence (MLQ); BAT total	375	−.36
Savu et al., 2023	Meaningful work (WAMI); MBI	304	−.34
Sumner & Kinsella, 2021	Presence (MLQ); BBI total	1,305	−.29
Sciotto et al., 2025	Meaningful work (QEEW 2.0); ProQOL CF	236	−.28
Correia & Almeida, 2020 (nurses)	Meaningful work (WAMI); OLBI, mean of 2 dimensions	268	−.26
Correia & Almeida, 2020 (physicians)	Meaningful work (WAMI); OLBI, mean of 2 dimensions	229	−.17
Bao et al., 2026	Meaningful work; EE scale	483	.39
Pooled, all samples	k = 11	4,794	−.31 [−.46, −.14]
Pooled, excluding Bao et al. (2026)	k = 10	4,311	−.37 [−.45, −.29]

Note. Correlations were transformed to Fisher's *z* and pooled with the DerSimonian–Laird random-effects estimator. All samples: $Q(10) = 361.34$, $p < .001$, $I^2 = 97.2\%$, $\tau^2 = 0.085$, 95% prediction interval [−.77, .36]. Excluding Bao et al. (2026): $Q(9) = 79.78$, $p < .001$, $I^2 = 88.7\%$, $\tau^2 = 0.020$, 95% prediction interval [−.63, −.05]. Where two burnout dimensions were reported, correlations were averaged. The pooling is exploratory and restricted to studies reporting comparable bivariate correlations; it is not a comprehensive meta-analysis. Except for Lynch et al. (2026), all correlations are cross-sectional.

4.6 *Presence Versus Search and Global Versus Work-Specific Meaning (RQ3)*

Four studies distinguished the presence of meaning from the search for meaning, and their findings were strikingly consistent. Presence of meaning was associated with lower burnout in each of them, whereas search for meaning was associated with higher burnout in three studies and was unrelated to burnout in one. Among Belgian early- and mid-career

nurses, presence correlated at $r = -.36$ and search at $r = .12$ with burnout (Van Simaeys et al., 2025); among frontline workers in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the corresponding correlations were −.29 and .26 (Sumner & Kinsella, 2021); and among Turkish psychiatrists, presence and search showed standardised associations of −.52 and .27, respectively (Soylu et al., 2026). Among hospice nurses, presence of meaning was associated with lower burnout, whereas search was associated with negative affect but not with burnout (Barnett et al., 2019). The longitudinal report from the British Irish cohort added that search for meaning was associated with poorer burnout outcomes particularly among workers with low presence of meaning (Sumner et al., 2026). Search for meaning thus appears to signal an unmet need rather than a resource.

Studies of global meaning in life and of work-specific meaning both showed predominantly favourable associations. Among studies with an interpretable direction, all studies of global meaning or purpose reported a favourable association, including the two studies of clergy (Crea & Francis, 2022; Village & Francis, 2026), whereas both unfavourable associations involved work-specific meaning among teachers (Bao et al., 2026; Sozer-Boz et al., 2024). The only study that assessed both forms in the same sample found that meaning of work was negatively correlated with burnout, whereas a short measure of meaning of life was weakly positively correlated with burnout (Grigorescu et al., 2022). This divergence is a single finding with small coefficients, but it underlines that the two forms of meaning should not be treated as interchangeable.

4.7 *Conditions Under Which Associations Vary (RQ4)*

Several studies modelled meaning together with closely related motivational constructs and reported that its unique association with burnout was reduced. Among Korean counsellors, the bivariate correlation between meaning of work and burnout was −.45, but its unique coefficient was negligible once sense of calling and living a calling were included in the model ($\beta = -.08$; He et al., 2023). Among social workers in New Zealand, the unique coefficients of meaningful work were small ($\beta = -.07$ to $-.12$), and most of the variance it shared with burnout overlapped with work engagement (Tan & Yeap, 2021). A similar overlap with psychological capital was reported in a second social work sample (Tan et al., 2019), and in Portuguese physicians and nurses, meaningful work retained a significant coefficient only for nurses' disengagement after organisational justice and professional identification were controlled (Correia & Almeida, 2020). These findings suggest that meaning is embedded in a cluster of interrelated motivational resources rather than operating in isolation.

Moderation analyses revealed both attenuating and amplifying patterns. In a two-wave study of emergency medicine clinicians, the association between work demands and later burnout was significant only at low levels of meaningful work, and this interaction remained significant when baseline burnout was controlled (Lynch et al., 2026). Among Belgian nurses, the association between presence of meaning and exhaustion was stronger when job resources such as influence at work were high, and the unfavourable association of search for meaning was confined to conditions of low job resources (Van Simaeys et al., 2025). Among professionals in eating-disorder wards, meaning in work was associated with lower burnout only among those with less than approximately twelve years of tenure (Hamama-Raz & Mazor, 2023), and among academic physicians, meaning derived from teaching was associated with lower burnout only among those who regarded teaching as the most meaningful part of their role (Klinefelter et al., 2022). In contrast, a large Swedish study found no attenuating role of meaning of work; instead, the association between contact-related emotional demands and exhaustion was slightly stronger at higher levels of meaning (Popucza, 2026). Among Chinese physical-education teachers, the positive association of meaningful work with exhaustion was weaker under high social support (Bao et al., 2026), and among Turkish special-education teachers, high meaningful work was associated with a higher likelihood of belonging to a burnout profile (Sozer-Boz et al., 2024).

Prospective and intervention evidence was limited but informative. In a longitudinal cohort of Belgian medical residents followed with annual surveys, meaningfulness was the resource most consistently associated with all burnout and engagement outcomes in mixed-effects models (Boone et al., 2026). Among emergency clinicians, meaningful work at baseline was correlated at $r = -.47$ with burnout two months later (Lynch et al., 2026), and in a repeated cross-sectional study of residents, meaningful work was associated with lower burnout in each of three survey waves (Brafford et al., 2024). In contrast, in an intensive longitudinal study of residents during the first COVID-19 wave, meaningful work was associated with lower burnout when examined alone but not when self-efficacy was entered simultaneously (Ju et al., 2022). Two studies evaluated meaning-oriented interventions. In a small randomised study, teachers who reflected daily for two weeks on meaningful incidents at work showed a reduction in burnout from 2.63 to 1.82, whereas burnout in the control group remained stable (2.34 to 2.42; Lavy, 2022). A quasi-experimental programme of humanism rounds for internal-medicine residents was followed by higher reported meaning among engaged residents, but the overall rate of burnout did not change (Kaplan et al., 2024).

4.8 *Evidence from Social Work and Social Care*

Seven studies sampled social workers or social-care staff, with a combined sample of more than 7,800 participants, of whom 5,965 came from a single nationally representative Chinese survey (Wang et al., 2025). All seven studies reported associations in the favourable direction. Among German social workers in refugee and homeless aid, meaning of work was associated with lower personal burnout ($\beta = -.14$) and strongly with work engagement (Mette et al., 2020). Among child and adult protective-services workers, higher purpose in life was associated with lower burnout, vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress, with models explaining approximately 11% to 21% of the variance (Singer et al., 2020). Among Israeli social workers, burnout was negatively associated with perceived meaning in life, whereas compassion satisfaction was positively associated with it (Itzick et al., 2018). Among Chinese social workers, professional efficacy, the inverse of the reduced accomplishment dimension of burnout, was positively associated with work meaningfulness (Wang et al., 2025). The two studies by Tan and colleagues indicated that meaningful work shared most of its association with burnout with work engagement and psychological capital (Tan et al., 2019; Tan & Yeap, 2021), and the study of supervisors in German social firms found a negative but non-significant coefficient (Kordsmeyer et al., 2022). Social work evidence is therefore consistent in direction but sparse, exclusively cross-sectional, and does not include any intervention study.

4.9 *Certainty of Evidence*

Applying the logic of the GRADE approach informally, the certainty that meaning is associated with lower burnout among helping professionals can be judged as moderate. The body of evidence is observational, which limits initial certainty, but the association is highly consistent in direction across 50 studies, settings and occupations, and a moderate pooled correlation was robust to sensitivity analyses. Certainty regarding the magnitude of the association is low because of substantial heterogeneity and the small number of studies contributing comparable correlations. Certainty regarding the temporal ordering of meaning and burnout, and regarding the benefits of meaning-oriented interventions, is very low, given only a handful of longitudinal studies and two small intervention studies with high risk of bias.

5. Discussion

5.1 *Principal Findings and Theoretical Integration*

This review integrated 60 quantitative studies examining the association between meaning and burnout across the helping professions. Four principal findings emerged. First, higher meaning was associated with lower burnout in almost all studies with an interpretable direction, across occupations, countries and instruments. Second, the bivariate association was of moderate size, with a pooled correlation of approximately −.37 after exclusion of one outlying sample, although heterogeneity was substantial. Third, the form of meaning mattered: the presence of meaning was associated with lower burnout, whereas the search for meaning was associated with higher burnout, and global and work-specific meaning occasionally diverged. Fourth, the association was conditional. It weakened when related motivational resources such as engagement and calling were modelled, it was stronger under favourable job resources in some studies, and it was absent or reversed in a small number of samples, all of which involved teachers working under demanding conditions.

These findings are compatible with the JD-R framework, in which personal resources are associated with lower strain and higher engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The consistent overlap of meaning with work engagement, calling and psychological capital suggests that meaning is best conceptualised as part of a broader configuration of motivational resources rather than as an isolated variable, a pattern that corresponds to the notion of resource caravans in COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The divergent associations of presence and search for meaning are consistent with the distinction between having and seeking meaning (Steger et al., 2006) and with the meaning-making model, in which active search may reflect an unresolved discrepancy between situational and global meaning (Park, 2010). For helping professionals, a persistent search for meaning may thus signal that the experiences of the job are no longer integrated into a coherent professional and personal narrative, an interpretation that would need to be examined with longitudinal and qualitative methods.

The logotherapeutic perspective offers a further interpretive frame. Frankl's (2006) proposition that meaning can be realised through work, through encounters and through the attitude adopted towards unavoidable suffering corresponds closely to the situation of helping professionals, whose work combines creative contribution, intense interpersonal encounter and repeated confrontation with suffering that cannot be removed. The present evidence is consistent with this proposition in a statistical sense: professionals who report a stronger sense of meaning also report less exhaustion, less depersonalisation and greater efficacy. It

does not, however, demonstrate that meaning prevents burnout. Given the predominance of cross-sectional designs, the reverse interpretation, that burnout erodes the capacity to experience meaning, is equally compatible with most of the data, and COR theory would lead one to expect reciprocal relations in which meaning and burnout co-evolve in gain and loss spirals. One study of clergy explicitly modelled purpose in life as a correlate of burnout typology rather than as its antecedent (Village & Francis, 2026), and one study of social workers treated meaning as the criterion variable (Itzick et al., 2018), illustrating that the direction of interpretation is a modelling choice rather than an empirical finding.

5.2 *The Meaning Paradox*

The small number of unfavourable and amplifying findings deserves particular attention because it is theoretically meaningful rather than merely anomalous. Among teachers working under effort–reward imbalance in border regions, meaningful work was positively associated with emotional exhaustion (Bao et al., 2026); among special-education teachers, high meaningful work coincided with membership in a burnout profile (Sozer-Boz et al., 2024); and among Swedish human-service staff, higher meaning was associated with a slightly stronger link between emotional demands and exhaustion (Popucza, 2026). These findings resonate with the description of deeply meaningful work as a double-edged sword (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Where professionals experience their work as a moral obligation, meaning may sustain engagement beyond the point of recovery, increase the subjective cost of compromising quality, and make professionals more willing to absorb structural deficits personally. In such constellations, meaning does not attenuate demands but may increase investment in them.

This meaning paradox has direct implications for the interpretation of the overall evidence. The predominantly favourable associations do not imply that more meaning is always better or that meaning can compensate for excessive demands. The moderation findings suggest instead that meaning is most clearly associated with lower burnout when it is embedded in adequate job resources, such as influence at work and social support (Bao et al., 2026; Van Simaeys et al., 2025), and when demands are not overwhelming. A tentative integrative interpretation is that meaning is associated with resilience when professionals have the means to act on what they find meaningful, and with strain when the gap between valued goals and feasible practice becomes chronic, a situation familiar from moral distress in social work and health care.

5.3 *Implications for Social Work Practice*

At the level of individual practice and supervision, the findings support the deliberate integration of meaning into reflective supervision and peer consultation. Supervision that enables social workers to identify and articulate meaningful moments in their work, to connect daily tasks with professional values, and to process situations in which meaning is threatened corresponds to the type of structured meaning reflection that was followed by lower burnout in the small, randomised study of teachers (Lavy, 2022). The distinction between presence and search for meaning suggests a practical diagnostic cue: social workers who report an intense but unsuccessful search for meaning may require particular attention, as this pattern was consistently associated with higher burnout. Meaning-centred group formats that have been developed for clinical populations (Breitbart et al., 2015; Vos & Vitali, 2018) and adapted for palliative-care nurses (Fillion et al., 2009) could be translated into supervision and staff-support programmes in social work, provided they are evaluated rigorously.

At the organisational level, the evidence argues against treating meaning as an individual coping resource that relieves organisations of responsibility for working conditions. The amplifying and unfavourable findings indicate that meaning can be overstretched when demands are excessive and resources scarce. Social work organisations should therefore protect the conditions under which meaningful practice is possible: manageable caseloads, time for direct work with clients rather than administration, professional discretion, supportive leadership and functioning teams. Responsible school leadership was associated with greater work meaningfulness and lower exhaustion among teachers (Polatcan et al., 2025), and job crafting showed shared variance with meaningful work and lower burnout among hospital professionals (Pal et al., 2026). Such approaches can complement, but not replace, structural reforms. An organisational culture that invokes the meaningfulness of social work while tolerating chronic overload risks converting a professional resource into a source of moral strain.

For social work education and early careers, two findings are relevant. Meaning in work was associated with lower burnout particularly among professionals with shorter tenure (Hamama-Raz & Mazor, 2023), and studies of early-career nurses and residents showed robust associations (Boone et al., 2026; Van Simaeys et al., 2025). Social work programmes and induction schemes could therefore include structured reflection on professional motivation and values, preparation for situations in which meaning is challenged, and an understanding of the double-edged character of strong professional commitment. Teaching

future social workers to recognise both the sustaining and the depleting potential of meaning may contribute to more realistic and sustainable professional identities.

5.4 *Strengths and Limitations*

The review has several strengths. It is, to current knowledge, the first systematic synthesis of the meaning–burnout association across the helping professions with an explicit social work focus; it integrates global and work-specific meaning; it combines direction-based vote counting with an exploratory quantitative estimate; and it pays systematic attention to unfavourable and conditional findings rather than reporting only the dominant pattern.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the database search was restricted to PubMed/MEDLINE and was complemented by a supplementary search in Google Scholar, Crossref and publisher platforms rather than by systematic searches in PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science or Social Services Abstracts. Although the supplementary search specifically targeted social work and education literature, relevant studies indexed only in these databases may have been missed, and the search should be extended in future updates. Second, the protocol was not prospectively registered, and screening and data extraction were performed by a single reviewer with AI-assisted pre-screening rather than by two independent reviewers, which increases the risk of selection and extraction errors. Third, only English-language publications were included. Fourth, statistics for several studies could be extracted only from abstracts, so direction rather than magnitude was available for a considerable proportion of studies. Fifth, the exploratory pooling was based on a small and heterogeneous subset of eleven samples, and averaging correlations across burnout dimensions may have obscured dimension-specific differences. Sixth, publication bias could not be assessed formally because of the small number of comparable estimates. Seventh, the evidence base itself is predominantly cross-sectional, based on self-report and convenience samples, and therefore subject to common-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Finally, meaning was operationalised with a wide variety of instruments, some of them single items or ad hoc scales, which limits the comparability of findings.

5.5 *Directions for Future Research*

Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs with at least three measurement occasions that allow the examination of reciprocal relations between meaning and burnout, ideally with cross-lagged panel models that separate within-person from between-person variance, as illustrated by the British Irish frontline cohort (Sumner et al., 2026). Social work, which is underrepresented relative to medicine and nursing, requires dedicated studies in

child protection, community mental health, refugee work and other high-demand fields. Randomised controlled trials of meaning-centred interventions for social workers, adapted from established meaning-centred approaches and combined with organisational measures, are needed to determine whether strengthening meaning is followed by reductions in burnout. Studies should distinguish consistently between the presence and search for meaning and between global and work-specific meaning, and should examine meaning together with calling, engagement and moral distress in order to clarify their unique and shared variance. Multilevel designs that link individual meaning to team and organisational characteristics could clarify under which conditions meaning is associated with resilience and under which it coincides with overcommitment. Finally, mixed-methods studies could illuminate how helping professionals construct, defend and lose meaning in their everyday practice.

6. Conclusion

Across 60 studies in social work and other helping professions, meaning was associated with lower burnout with remarkable consistency, and the bivariate association was of moderate size. The presence of meaning was associated with lower burnout, whereas the search for meaning was associated with higher burnout. At the same time, the association was conditional and, in a few demanding settings, absent or reversed. For social work, the evidence supports the integration of meaning into supervision, professional education and staff support, but it does not support the use of meaning as a substitute for adequate working conditions. Meaning sustains helping professionals most clearly where organisations enable them to practise in accordance with what they find meaningful.

Statements and Declarations

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no competing financial or non-financial interests that could be perceived to have influenced the work reported in this article.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was not required because this systematic review analysed data from previously published studies and did not involve the collection of new data from human participants.

Informed Consent

Not applicable.

Registration and Protocol

The review was not prospectively registered. The eligibility criteria, search strategy and synthesis plan are reported in the Method section and in Appendix A.

Data Availability Statement

The data extraction file, risk-of-bias ratings and the code for the exploratory pooling are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualisation of the review, the search strategy, study selection, data extraction, risk-of-bias assessment, synthesis, interpretation, and the drafting and revision of the manuscript.

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Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools (Claude, Anthropic) were used to support database querying, pre-screening of records, data extraction and language editing. All eligibility decisions, extracted data, analyses and interpretations were verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of this article.

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Appendix A

Search Strategy

PubMed/MEDLINE (searched 2 November 2026; publication date from 2010):

("meaning in life"[Title/Abstract] OR "meaningful work"[Title/Abstract] OR "work meaningfulness"[Title/Abstract] OR "purpose in life"[Title/Abstract] OR "sense of meaning"[Title/Abstract] OR "meaning of work"[Title/Abstract]) AND (burnout[Title/Abstract] OR "emotional exhaustion"[Title/Abstract] OR "compassion fatigue"[Title/Abstract])

Result: 215 records.

Supplementary search (Google Scholar, Crossref metadata service and publisher platforms, November 2026). Each of the following queries was run separately; results were screened by title and, where relevant, abstract and full record: (1) meaningful work burnout social workers; (2) meaning in life burnout social workers; (3) purpose in life burnout social work; (4) work meaningfulness emotional exhaustion child welfare workers; (5) meaning in life compassion fatigue counselors; (6) meaningful work burnout teachers; (7) meaning in life burnout psychotherapists; (8) meaning in life secondary traumatic stress social workers; (9) logotherapy burnout helping professionals intervention; (10) meaning-centered intervention burnout healthcare workers randomized. Backward citation tracking was applied to the reference lists of included social work studies.