

Dealing with Suffering using the: Theory of Logotherapy

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THE FATHER OF LOGOTHERAPY

Dr Viktor Frankl of Vienna (1905 – 1997) is the originator of the psychotherapeutic school of logotherapy. Frankl attended the University of Vienna, where he earned doctorates in medicine and philosophy. Frankl received training in individual psychology from Adler. Some of the basic concepts of logotherapy, such meaning, freedom and responsibility bear the imprint of Adler and Freud¹. He was appointed professor of neurology and psychiatry there in 1947.

Frankl was imprisoned for various periods from 1942 until 1945 during World War II in the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau. It was here his theories were put to a severe test and partly through that experience came to the central premise of logotherapy that: “ that humans' most fundamental motive is to find meaning in life”.² His experience in the Nazi camps was recorded in *Man's Search for Meaning*³. His personal triumph over unimaginable trauma has been the most compelling testimony of the theory.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF LOGOTHERAPY

Logotherapy, a treatment modality based on the application of humanistic and existential psychology, is used in finding meaning and purpose in ones life. The word logo – therapy is derived from the word *logos*, which directly translated from Greek means, the will of God that controls the principles of the universe or meaning.⁴ Logotherapy is also known to be “The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy”.

Dr Victor Frankl, developed logotherapy and existential analysis in the late 1930's due to his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis, developed by Adler and Freud's School of Individual psychology. He accepts Sigmund Freud's concept of unconsciousness, but considers the will to meaning as more fundamental than the will to pleasure.⁵ A major difference between logotherapy and psychoanalysis that should be noted is that the former focuses on the past, while the latter as Frankl states, “ focuses rather on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient ”. He goes further by making the deduction that one can describe logotherapy as a meaning centred psychotherapy.

Although many authors give synonymous meaning to the theory of logotherapy and existential analysis Frankl makes a distinct distinction between the two. Existential analysis concerns itself with an analytical therapeutic process involved in addressing the patient's spiritual and existential needs, whereas logotherapy

¹ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

² Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

³ Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl V, 1963

⁴ The pursuit of meaning, Fabry J, 1994

⁵ Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

gives special emphasis on the hidden logos of his existence by means of an analytical process.⁶

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

According to Frankl, it is not possible to practice logotherapy on anyone, without understanding the spiritual dimension of man's existence there are two levels of meaning:

(a) *Present Meaning / Meaning of Moment* and (b) *Ultimate / Super - meaning*.

Dr Frankl is of the opinion that one should concentrate more on productive meaning (in other words specific present meaning), rather than the ultimate (in other words the meaning of life), as these exist in a supra-dimension. Due to the fact that logotherapy is a life-philosophy it is essential, when wanting to discover who one is, it is vital that one finds meaning of specific present meanings in order to establish one's life.⁷

Each individual must discover the specific meaning of the moment⁸. The therapist is a mere facilitator in the entire process and can only guide the client to those areas in which meaning can be found.⁹

BASIC TENETS OF LOGOTHERAPY

The doctrine of logotherapeutic therapy is based upon the concepts of; *will to meaning, meaning to life* and *freedom of will*. Without an in-depth understanding of the mentioned concepts it is almost impossible to understand and apply logotherapy effectively, if at all.

WILL TO MEANING

The will to meaning is, the basic striving of man to find meaning and purpose to his own life. Man's search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not as many authors contend, a secondary rationalisation in the form of values. Will to meaning is in most cases based on fact, not faith. Frankl warns that one should avoid dealing with values in the form of self-expression. He goes on to say that, meaning is not derived from man's emerging existence but should be construed as something that confronts existence. The will to meaning is possible because of the human capacity to transcend one's immediate circumstances. "Being human

⁶ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

⁷ What the hell am I living for? For the layperson: A Glossary of terms common in Logotherapy, Havenga - Coetzer P (University of Pretoria)

⁸ The pursuit of meaning, Fabry J, 1994

⁹ Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

is being always directed, and pointing to, something or someone other than oneself: to a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter, a cause to serve or a person to love”¹⁰

It is contended by Jean Paul Sartre, man invents himself, he designs his own “essence”; that is to say, what essentially is, including what he should be, or ought to become. However, I think the meaning of existence is not invented by us, but rather detected.

Values, however, do not drive a man; they do not push him, but rather pull him. This is a difference; by the way, of which I am constantly reminded whenever I go through the doors of an American hotel. One of them has to be pulled while the other has to be pushed. Now, if I say man is pulled by values, what is implicitly referred to is the fact that there is always freedom involved: the freedom of man to make his choice between accepting rejecting an offer, i.e., to fulfil a meaning potentiality, or else to forfeit it.¹¹

However, it should be made quite clear that there cannot exist in man any such thing as a moral drive, or even a religious drive, in the same manner as we speak of man being determined by basic instincts. Man is never driven to moral behaviour; in each instance, he decides to behave morally. Man does not do so in order to satisfy a moral drive and to have a good conscience. Man does not behave morally for the sake of having a good conscience but for the sake of a cause, to which he commits himself, or for a person whom he loves, or for the sake of his God.

MEANING TO LIFE

Meaning is unique to each person, and each person has to discover meaning of each particular situation. The therapists can only challenge and guide the patient to potential areas of meaning, namely *creative*, *experimental* and *attitudinal values*¹². According to Dr Frankl logotherapy, can discover meaning to life in three different ways¹³:

- (1) By creating or doing a deed / work
- (2) Experiencing something or encountering someone
- (3) The attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering

Attitudinal values seem to be of paramount importance in situations of unavoidable suffering. Dr Frankl illustrates this by comparing life to a game, by

¹⁰ The unheard cry for meaning, Frankl V, 1978

¹¹ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

¹² Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

¹³ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

stating that, “ there is no such thing as the best move or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of the opponent ”. One should desist from searching for an abstract meaning in life. ¹⁴

Each and every individual has his own specific mission in life and this cannot be transferred nor repeated. Every situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem to resolve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Everyone’s task is unique as is his opportunity to implement it. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence. Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualisation. Selfactualisation.¹⁵

FREEDOM OF WILL

Frankl realises that *human freedom* is finite freedom. Man is not free from conditions, but he is free to take a stand in regard to them. Freedom of will is possible because of the human capacity for selfdistance or self-detachment. By virtue of this capacity man is capable of detaching himself not only from a situation, but also from himself. He is capable of choosing his attitude towards himself.¹⁶

It should be noted though that, with freedom comes responsibility and as Fabry ¹⁷ correctly states responsibility without freedom is tyranny and freedom without responsibility leads to anarchy, which can lead to boredom, anxiety neurosis.

APPLYING LOGOTHERAPETIC TECHNIQUES WHEN DEALING WITH SUFFERING

Suffering is not a necessary condition for meaning, but it tends to trigger the quest for meaning. Frankl observes that people are willing to endure to any suffering, if they are convinced that this suffering has meaning. However, suffering without meaning leads to despair.

Logotherapists do not ask for the reason for suffering, but guide their clients towards the realisation of concrete meanings and choose the right attitudes. Often Logotherapists appeal to their clients to take a heroic stand towards suffering. Being human means that one is susceptible to suffering which usually is present in the three negative facets of human existence: pain, guilt and death.¹⁸ Neurosis is likely to originate from our attempt to obscure the reality of pain, guilt and death as existential facts.

¹⁴ Man’s Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

¹⁵ Man’s Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

¹⁶ The will to meaning : Foundations and applications of logotherapy , Frankl V E , 1969

¹⁷ The pursuit of meaning, Fabry J, 1994

¹⁸ Man’s Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

DEREFLECTION

Frankl developed de – reflection to counteract hyper intention (trying too hard) and hyper – reflection (thinking too hard). Examples of the former are for instance trying too hard to fall asleep, excessive pursuance of pleasure. An example of the latter is addiction. Hyper reflection involves excessively monitoring one's performance and becoming very anxious about failure. This may turn minor problems into catastrophes and small anthills into huge mountains.¹⁹

This technique is built upon the human capacity of self-distancing and self-transcendence. Therefore clients are requested to direct their problems to more positive aspects. It is a proven fact that choosing a right attitude can transcend not only external factors but also ourselves. The goal of de-reflection is to help clients transcend themselves and move towards creative and experiential values.

TRAGIC OPTIMISM

Tragic optimism turns suffering into a human achievement or accomplishment instead of a form of sorrow that could cause neurosis in itself. This can also be found in the form of deriving from guilt the opportunity of changing oneself for the better. This can further be explained in the sense that one can derive from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.

PARADOXICAL INTENTION

Paradoxical intention is defined as follows; the patient is encouraged to do, or to wish to happen the very thing he fears (the former applying to the phobic patient, the latter to obsessive – compulsive.)²⁰

This technique builds upon the human capacity for self-detachment to break the vicious cycle, that traps people in psychogenic Neurosis, such as phobia, anxiety and obsessive – behaviour. Self-attachment enables a patient to adopt a new attitude, to stand back or laugh at the situation. In applying paradoxical intention, the therapist intention mobilises and utilises human capacity for humour.²¹

The most common reaction to “fear of fear” is “flight from fear”, and the phobic pattern is maintained by excessive avoidance. This vicious cycle is broken when the pathogenic fear is replaced by a paradoxical wish. As a result the patient becomes immune of situations that formerly created anxiety.²²

¹⁹ Man's Search for Meaning – An Introduction to logotherapy (Revised), Frankl V, 1984

²⁰ The unheard cry for meaning, Frankl V, 1978

²¹ The unheard cry for meaning, Frankl V, 1978

²² Logotherapy, Wong TP, 1998

In order to successfully apply the paradoxical intention, with a phobic patient, one he must try and instil a feeling of self-detachments within the patient.

The second step is to ask the patient to develop a new attitude of not fearing but welcoming the symptoms. This typically results in a reduction of symptoms, which allows the therapist towards achieving meaningful living. In the case of obsessive – compulsive disorder, the patient fights against the obsession or compulsions. It should be noted with great care that fighting against these symptoms could amplify their effect. Once again a vicious cycle is created. The only way of actually breaking it is to think positive about their effects and treat them as normal.

Paradoxical intention has been used with increasing frequency with good results especially in treating clients who suffer from phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder.²³

²³ Logotherapy for the helping professional , Guttman D , 1996

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