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Toward a Dual-Systems Model of What Makes Life Worth Living

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What makes life worth living? This is probably the most important question ever asked in psychology because it is vitally related to human survival and flourishing. It is also a highly complex question with no simple answers to the extent that it touches all aspects of humanity—biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Thus, only a holistic approach can provide a comprehensive picture of meaningful living. To further complicate matters, every person has his or her own ideas on what constitutes the good life. Many people believe that money is the answer; that is why money remains the most powerful motivator in a consumer society. Others, especially those in academia, believe that reputation matters most. For those people living in abject poverty, heaven is being free from hunger. Given such individual differences in values and beliefs, is it even possible to provide general answers based on psychological research?

Viktor Frankl (1946/1985) found a way to reconcile general principles with individual differences. On the one hand, he emphasized that it was up to each individual to define and discover meaning in life; on other hand, he devoted most of his professional life trying to uncover the principles that could facilitate individuals' quests for meaning. His main finding is that "the will to meaning" is the key to living a worthy and fulfilling life regardless of personal preferences and circumstances (Frankl, 1946/1985; Chapter 28, this volume). The present chapter represents an extension of Frankl's work in a more precise and empirically testable model.

Numerous psychological models have been proposed to account for meaning in life. For example, the existential perspective tends to focus on learning to live with the dark side of the human condition, such as suffering, meaninglessness, loneliness, and death, and creating meaning through one's courageous choices and creative actions (Sartre, 1990; Yalom, 1980). In contrast, positive psychology emphasizes positive experiences and emotions as the pillars of a worthwhile life (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi,

2000). The dual-systems model provides a bridge between these two intellectual traditions and integrates various streams of research relevant to the question of the meaning of life.

The dual-systems model attempts to address three important issues vital to developing a comprehensive psychological account of a meaningful life: (a) what people really want and how to achieve their life goals, (b) what people fear and how to overcome their anxieties, and (c) how people makes sense of the predicaments and paradoxes of life. The first two issues are instrumental in nature, having to do with adaptive mechanisms, whereas the last issue is philosophical and spiritual in nature, having to do with how one makes sense of the self and one's place in the world. Answers to the first two issues depend on one's philosophy of life.

What Do People Really Want?

It is truism that for life to be worth living, people need to enjoy living and feel satisfied that their needs and wants are met. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy model posits that people need to meet all five levels of needs in order to be self-actualized. Peterson and Seligman (2004) propose that people want to live a life of pleasure, engagement, and meaning in order to live a really happy life. Baumeister (1991) emphasizes that meaning in life depends on purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth. Based on implicit theory research, I directly asked people what they really wanted in order to live an ideal meaningful life if money were no longer an issue (Wong, 1998b). Based on numerous studies, I have found that the worthy life consisted of the following components: happiness, achievement, relationship, intimacy, religion, altruism, self-acceptance, and fair treatment. All the foregoing models implicitly assume that (a) we know that the various psychological needs are markers of the good life and (b) we know how to meet these needs.

Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world with perfect justice, equal opportunities, and unlimited resources for all individuals to get what they want in life. Fate often intervenes, such as earthquakes and accidents, which totally disrupt one's life. Another relevant issue is that we are not perfect. Most people do make mistakes and often derail their own best efforts because of some such character defects as greed and blind ambition. At the end of their earthly journey, some people may discover that they have not really lived even though they were successful in realizing all their dreams and wishes. Finally, there is a philosophical dimension. People need to reflect on the big picture and learn to come to terms with such existential givens as sickness, aging, and death, which pose a constant threat to their dreams of a good life. They also need to examine their own lives to make sure they do not spend a lifetime chasing after the wind.

What Do People Want to Avoid?

We do not need empirical proof that all people naturally avoid pain, suffering, and death. Similarly, we want to be free from deprivation, discrimination,

oppression, and forms of ill-treatment. We also shun rejection, opposition, defeat, failure, and all the obstacles that prevent us from realizing our dreams. We want to stay away from difficult people who upset us and make our lives miserable. Finally, we all struggle with our own limitations—areas of weaknesses and deficiencies.

In addition to the foregoing litany of woes, we also need to be concerned with the existential anxieties inherent in the human condition (Yalom, 1980). No one really enjoys suffering, but meaning in life depends on discovering the meaning of suffering (Frankl, 1946/1985). Furthermore, our ability to achieve the good life depends on our efficacy in coping with stresses, misfortunes, and negative emotions. The dual-systems model not only recognizes the inevitable unpleasant realities of life but also specifies the mechanisms of translating negativity into positive outcomes.

How Do People Make Sense of Life?

People may not be able to articulate their philosophy of life, but they all possess one; for we all have assumptions, beliefs, values, and worldviews that help us make sense of our lives. The huge literature on attribution research suggests that people are both lay scientists and philosophers (e.g., Weiner, 1975; Wong, 1991; Wong & Weiner, 1981).

Our philosophy about what constitutes the good life can determine how we make choices and how we live. Those people who believe that the good life is to eat, drink, and be merry will spend their lives on the hedonic treadmill. Those who believe that the purpose of life is to serve God will devote their lives to fulfilling God's calling.

Every philosophy of life leads to the development of a certain mindset—a frame of reference or prism—through which we make value judgments. For example, hedonism will contribute to a happiness-mindset that values positive experiences and emotions as most important for subjective well-being. Some of the widely used instruments of life satisfaction reflect the happiness-mindset. For example, the well-known Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) include such items as “My conditions of life are excellent” and “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.”

In contrast, a eudaimonic philosophy (Aristotle, trans. 2004) is conducive to a meaning mindset that considers virtue as the key to flourishing. The joy of living comes from doing good. As a case in point, Jim Elliot died young as a missionary because he chose the path of self-sacrifice to serve God and others: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Elliot, 1989, p. 15). Mahatma Gandhi, who gave his life in the struggle for freedom for his country, wrote, “Joy lies in the fight, in the attempt, in the suffering involved, not in the victory itself” (Attenborough, 2008, p. 3). A sense of life satisfaction can come from the defiant human spirit of fighting with courage and dignity. In *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus (1942/1991) concludes

that “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (p. 123). This type of life satisfaction can best be measured by a psychological instrument that focuses on eudaimonic well-being (Huta, 2009; Waterman, 2008).

Why do I focus on the meaning mindset? For most people, life is full of hardships and struggles. A life of endless happiness without pain can only be achieved by reducing human beings to robots or brains connected to machines capable of delivering constant stimulation to the brain’s pleasure center. Even when individuals are successful beyond their wildest dreams, their lives are not exempt from physical pain and psychological suffering. Moreover, a single-minded pursuit of personal happiness and success is not sustainable—eventually, it will lead to despair, disillusion, and other psychological problems (Schumaker, 2007). Thus, Schumaker advocates the creation of a society that will “attach greater value to the achievement of a meaningful life” (2007, p. 284).

The meaning mindset focuses on the person (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1995) as meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. It also capitalizes on the human capacity for reflection and awakening (Wong, 2007). The ability to reflect on and articulate one’s worldview can facilitate positive changes. The meaning mindset also involves understanding the structure, functions, and processes of meaning (Wong, in press-a, in press-b). Without a personally defined meaning and purpose, individuals would experience life as being on a ship without a rudder. An enduring passion for living comes only from commitment to a higher purpose. In short, a meaning mindset will facilitate the dual process of striving for authentic happiness and overcoming adversities.

The Basic Postulates of the Dual-Systems Model

The basic tenets of logotherapy (Chapter 28, this volume) are applicable to the dual-systems model. The following postulates are specific to the dynamic interaction between positives and negatives (see Figure 1.1).

1. In reality, positives and negatives often coexist. It is rare, if not impossible, to have purely positive or negative conditions (Chapters 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 21, and 22, this volume).
2. Similar to the concept of yin and yang, every positive or negative element contains a seed of its opposite. For example, one can be happy about a promotion but worried about the extra stresses involved. By the same token, one can feel sad about losing a job but feel happy that one can go back to school for retraining. Thus, a purely either-or dichotomy is inadequate in capturing the complexities of human experiences.
3. The approach and avoidance systems coexist and operate in an interdependent fashion. The approach system represents appetitive

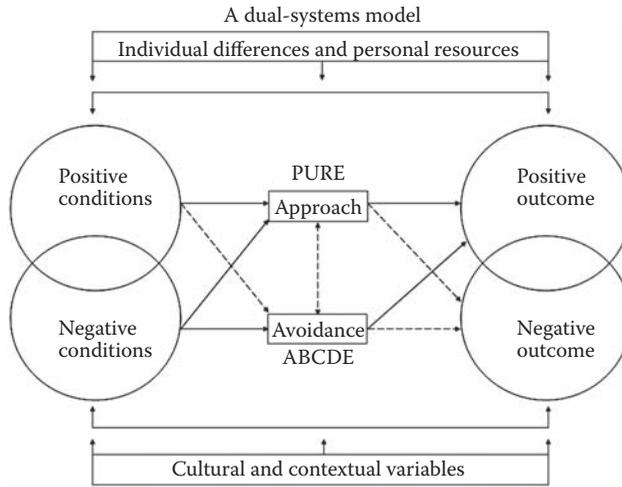


Figure 1.1 Schematic of the key components and links in the dual-systems model.

behaviors, positive affects, goal strivings, and intrinsic motivations. The avoidance system represents defensive mechanisms against noxious conditions, threats, and negative emotions. Both systems need to interact with each other in order to optimize positive outcomes (Chapters 2, 7, and 11, this volume). In other words, neither system can function effectively all by itself over the long haul. For example, an appetitive system will eventually implode unless it is checked by the warning of risks and discomforts associated with overconsumption. The approach and avoidance systems each involve different emotional-behavioral processes and neurophysiological substrates. When the two systems work together in a balanced and cooperative manner, the likelihood of survival and flourishing is greater than when the focus remains exclusively on either approach or avoidance.

4. Different systems predominate in different situations. In countries that enjoy peace and prosperity, the approach system predominates in everyday-life situations. However, in areas devastated by war or natural disaster, the avoidance system predominates. Yet no matter which system predominates, individuals are always better off when they make good use of the two complementary systems. For example, even in desperate times of coping with excruciating pain and impending death, the joy of listening to beautiful music can make life worth living.
5. When a person is not actively engaged in approach or avoidance, the default or neutral stage is regulated by the awareness regulation system. The Pavlovian orienting response (Pavlov, 1927/2003) is a good example of this effortless attention system. Mindful awareness is also

important because it is primarily concerned with being fully attuned to the here and now; as a result, it makes us open to new discoveries of the small wonders and miracles of being alive.

6. Meaning plays a pivotal role in the dual-systems model. Meaning is involved in life protection as well as life expansion, thereby contributing to enhancing well-being and health and buffering against negatives (Chapters 7, 8, and 20, this volume).
7. Self-regulation systems are shaped by individual differences, personal resources, and cultural or contextual variables (Chapters 2, 7, 11, 20, 21, and 22, this volume).

A Description of the Dual-Systems Model

Individual Differences

How we make sense of the environment and respond to various situations reflect individual differences. The Big Five personality factors (McCrae & Costa, 1987) are relevant; for example, openness is related to mindful awareness, and conscientiousness is related to responsible actions. One's mindset is relevant to making value judgments. The story one lives by can also make a difference (Chapters 5, 14, and 18, this volume). Finally, individual differences in psychological resources may affect efficacy in coping with the demands of life (Wong, 1993).

Culture and Cultural Context

Both personality and adaptation efforts are shaped by cultural contexts (Chapter 16, this volume; Wong & Wong, 2005). Cultural influence is especially strong in shaping our perception, thinking, and meaning construction (Bruner, 1990; Shweder, 1991). In fact, the complete process from antecedent conditions to outcomes can be influenced by culture. What is positive and negative are shaped by cultural norms. It is not possible to understand the good life apart from various contextual factors. Recently, Sheldon (2009) also proposed a multilevel model of human flourishing involving biological and cognitive levels of the persons within supportive social contexts and cultures. Similarly, DelleFave (2009) emphasized that optimal experiences vary according to cultural contexts and meaning making.

Antecedent Conditions

Positive and negative conditions tend to overlap. The overlapping area indicates ambiguous or neutral conditions in which there is no urgent need for either approach or avoidance. There are no purely positive or negative conditions, however; for even at the extreme positive or negative end, elements of the opposite may still exist. In fact, the model posits that some negativity is not only inevitable but also beneficial for our well-being over the long haul.

For instance, it never hurts to remind ourselves of the fragility and finitude of life and be aware of the risks of overconfidence and greed.

Outcomes

Positive outcomes result from successful adaptations. They include states of satisfaction, success, personal growth, and meaning fulfillment. Positive outcomes are accompanied by such positive emotions as happiness, satisfaction, and relief. Positive outcomes have the capacity of reinforcing behaviors that precede them.

Negative outcomes represent ineffective or unsuccessful adaptations. They include states of deprivation and frustration. They are accompanied by such aversive and negative emotions as anger and anxiety.

Positive and negative outcomes overlap because there is often a downside for every gain, and an upside for every loss. The dual-system also posits that a balanced attitude is better than being carried away by the ecstasy of success or dragged down to the abyss by defeat.

The Approach System

The approach system predominates when conditions are positive. More specifically, the positive-approach system seeks to do what is pleasant, engaging, meaningful, and what contributes to growth and life expansion. It includes all the appetitive aspects of life, among them consummatory behaviors, incentive motivation, pursuit of happiness and success, and all positive motivations. The positive system not only provides the energies and goals for a purpose-driven life but also generates positive emotions that make one feel life is worth living. Positive experiences and emotions come from both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation includes the striving for competence, creativity, justice, doing good, and experiencing the “flow.” Extrinsic motivations include positive feelings of goal attainment and the rewards that come from success. The dual-systems model emphasizes the value of pursuing a higher purpose as the main pathway to meaningful living. Limiting one’s goals to fulfilling one’s physical desires or misguided selfish ambitions may lead to transitory happiness and may even result in regression and unhappiness (Chapters 4, 7, 9, 14, 15, 21, and 22, this volume).

The avoidance system intersects with the approach system at three junctures. First, even before embarking on the pursuit of a life goal, individuals always face elements of apprehension and fear of failure that may trigger an avoidance tendency. Second, individuals might encounter a setback or opposition in the process of striving toward a goal. Third, once a goal is achieved, the outcome might not be 100% positive. Success may create a backlash, invite a storm of criticisms, or lead individuals to a sense of disillusion and disappointment. Such interactions with negativity can be employed to increase wisdom and resilience for meaningful living.

The positive system can facilitate the avoidance system in at least four ways. First, maintaining a hopeful and positive attitude can reduce the threat of negative conditions. Second, a strong-approach response in spite of anxieties can reduce the avoidance tendency. Third, positive outcomes of success can lead to a reappraisal of the negative condition as less threatening. Finally, discovering the benefits and positive meanings of setbacks can reduce the adverse effects of negative outcomes.

The PURE Model

PURE represents the four ingredients that define meaning: Purpose, Understanding, Responsible Action, and Enjoyment or Evaluation. (see Chapter 28, this volume, for a more detailed explanation). PURE adds a meaning perspective to approach-oriented activities. This extra layer of meaning enables us to become aware of what we are striving for and thus avoid blindly pursuing things that will destroy us in the end. A clear sense of purpose and significance can also increase the motivation for goal striving (Wong, 1998a).

Purpose: The Motivational Component Purpose is the most important component in the meaning structure because it serves several functions as the engine, the fuel, and the steering wheel. Purpose includes goals, directions, incentive objects, values, aspirations, and objectives and is concerned with such questions as these: What does life demand of me? What should I do with my life? What really matters in life? A purpose-driven life is an engaged life committed to pursuing a preferred future. Purpose determines one's life direction and destiny. A meaning mindset increases the likelihood that one's life purpose is consistent with one's life calling and highest values.

Klinger (Chapter 2, this volume) emphasizes that

the human brain cannot sustain purposeless living. It was not designed for that. Its systems are designed for purposive action. When that is blocked, they deteriorate, and the emotional feedback from idling those systems signals extreme discomfort and motivates the search for renewed purpose, renewed meaning. This accounts for Viktor Frankl's (1946/1963; 1969) observation of a *will to meaning*.

Understanding: The Cognitive Component Understanding encompasses cognitive activities, a sense of coherence, making sense of situations, understanding one's own identity and other people, and effectively communicating and building relationships. It is concerned with such questions as these: What has happened? What does it mean? How do I make sense of the world? What am I doing here? Who am I? A life with understanding is a life with clarity and coherence. Weinstein, Ryan, and Deci (Chapter 4, this volume) emphasize self-knowledge: "In short, to find true meaning, individuals must get to know who

they truly are—that is, know what is valuable and important to them—and act in accord with that knowledge.” According to Steger (Chapter 8, this volume), the cognitive component of meaning in life refers to the understandings of who we are, what the world is like, and how we fit in. People often depend on narratives to make sense of life; Sommer, Baumeister, and Stillman (Chapter 14, this volume) suggest that their findings “reveal that the construction of narratives provides individuals with an opportunity to restructure events in memory in ways that reflect positively on the self and add a sense of coherence and stability.”

Responsible Action: The Behavioral Component Responsible action includes appropriate reactions and actions, doing what is morally right, finding the right solutions, making amends. It is concerned with such questions as these: What is my responsibility in this situation? What is the right thing to do? What options do I have? What choices should I make? A worthy life is based on the responsible exercise of human freedom and personal agency. Frankl (1946/1985) emphasizes the need to be aware of the demand of each situation. A meaning mindset will predispose individuals to do what is right and behave responsibly in the face of pressures and temptations.

Evaluation: The Emotional or Evaluative Component Evaluation includes assessing the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a given situation or in life as a whole. It is concerned with such questions as these: Have I achieved what I set out to do? Am I happy with how I have lived my life? If this is love, why am I still unhappy? A meaningful life is based on reflection and self-evaluation. A strong sense of dissatisfaction will likely trigger the quest for meaning and activate the PURE model one more time. A meaningful life is a happy and fulfilling life, even when the process of searching for meaning may be unpleasant and costly. Happiness is an inherent component of meaning because satisfaction flows naturally from what is meaningful and virtuous. If we have truly implemented the previous three steps of P, U, and R, then the inevitable consequence is to enjoy a sense of purpose, significance, and happiness.

Well-being not only reflects healthy functioning and happiness (Ryan & Huta, 2009) but also serves as an evaluative function in the self-determination process (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). According to King and Hicks (Chapter 6, this volume), “Experiences that bring us joy are likely to be those experiences that make our lives meaningful.”

The Avoidance System

The avoidance regulation system encompasses the tendency to avoid pain and overcome adversities. It involves the primitive fight-or-flight or freeze coping responses, unconscious defense mechanisms, as well as intentional coping

endeavors. The system also includes warning signals that protect individuals from potential threats and things that are wrong in their lives. Paradoxically, existential anxieties are important to spur us on to living vitally and authentically. Accepting the growth potentials of negative conditions can strengthen the approach system (Chapters 7, 10, 15, 24, and 27, this volume).

Some individuals prefer to bury their heads in the sand in avoidance and denial. They may also resort to drugs or other addictions and distractions to shield themselves from the painful realities of life (Chapter 26, this volume). They may try to devote all their time and energy to pursuing instant happiness with quick fixes, but such efforts are doomed to failure because the reality of existential and situational problems eventually catches up to them and blows up in their faces. The approach system can help strengthen these individuals through the following pathways:

1. The motivation to overcome a solvable negative condition can add to the positive motivation of approach, resulting in stronger motivation. For example, the motivation to avoid failure can augment the desire to achieve success.
2. Problem-solving behaviors can increase the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes.
3. The process of struggling to overcome a very stressful situation will increase resilience and build character strengths (Chapters 5, 10, 11, 24, and 27, this volume).
4. When a problem is totally unsolvable and beyond one's control, then one seeks to transform and transcend the situation through the ABCDE strategy (to be explained later). This process typically involves some kind of self-transformation and strengthening of one's belief and value systems. The ability to transcend unsolvable life problems and existential givens will increase one's capacity to cope with life demands (Chapters 5, 7, 8, 10, 18, 21, 24, and 26, this volume).

The human story is one of tenacious and heroic struggles; otherwise, the human race would not have survived for so long. It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention, or frustration is the father of creativity. It has also been said that what does not kill you makes you stronger—a statement originally made by Friedrich Nietzsche and popularized by Viktor Frankl. Thus, negative experiences and negative affects can be energizing and life expanding.

ABCDE: The Transformative Process

The ABCDE intervention strategy is the main tool in dealing with negative life experiences in situations of unavoidable suffering. Totally different from the ABCDE sequence involved in the rational-emotive therapy process (Ellis,

1962, 1987), this present ABCDE is similar to acceptance and commitment therapy in its emphasis on commitment to adaptive action rather than correcting one's thinking. Simply put, ABCDE stands for Acceptance, Belief and affirmation, Commitment to specific goals or actions, Discovering the meaning and significance of self and situations, and Evaluation of the outcome and enjoying the positive results. These components generate corresponding principles:

1. *Accept* and confront the reality—the *reality principle*.
2. *Believe* that life is worth living—the *faith principle*.
3. *Commit* to goals and actions—the *action principle*.
4. *Discover* the meaning and significance of self and situations—the *Aha! principle*.
5. *Evaluate* the foregoing—the *self-regulation principle*.

ABCDE is essential for insolvable problems, but it is also helpful in coping with problems that are within one's control. For example, the wisdom of accepting one's limitations and deficiencies can provide relief from unnecessary anxieties and enable one to choose a career that capitalizes on one's strengths.

Meaning-Based Self-Regulation Systems

Both PURE and ABCDE are meaning-based self-regulation systems. People make sense of their situations and then decide on their reactions. Furthermore, they evaluate their progress in their efforts to achieve positive goals or overcome negative conditions. Self-regulatory feedback enables individuals to adjust their strategies and reset their goals. Disillusion and depression will set in when individuals persist in pursuing a career goal for which they do not have the necessary talents. Positive systems may also come to a crushing halt when disaster strikes, such as being diagnosed with terminal cancer. In such cases, negative systems are needed to make the necessary changes in order to adapt to the new reality.

Individuals who are exposed only to positive outcomes and positive conditions tend to be locked in an upward spiral until they implode. Such individuals tend to lose their sense of reality and do not know when to stop. They are also ill prepared for obstacles because they have not had the opportunity to develop sufficient inner strength to cope with adversities. The downward spiral refers to the vicious cycle of avoidance leading to more avoidance. Repeated exposure to negative events may make people overvigilant and fearful. These predictions are based on the dual-systems model as schematized in Figure 1.2.

Hypotheses Based on the Dual-Systems Model

The dual-systems model affirms that one can still squeeze out meaning and satisfaction from negative situations, which people instinctively avoid, but

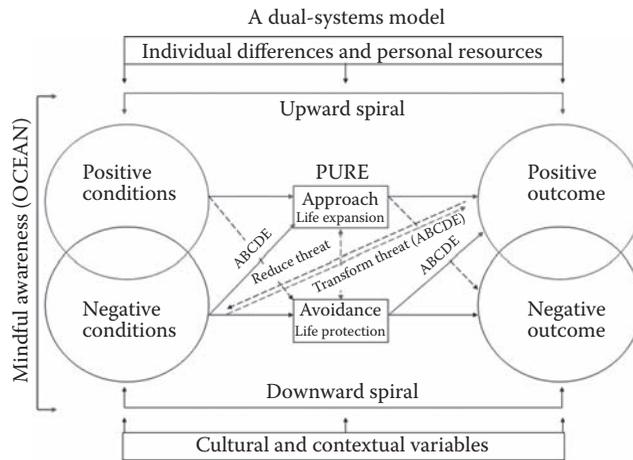


Figure 1.2 Interactions and meaning-based regulations within the dual-systems model.

also guards against the excesses and pitfalls in the sole pursuit of success and happiness. According to this model, decision making is a dialectic process of managing paradoxes and dilemmas. For example, when one's energy is taken up with denying and avoiding death, one may miss out on the opportunities and challenges of living a vital and fulfilling life. The paradox is that one can live fully only by accepting death. A balanced vibrant life will result from the process of managing optimal negative–positive interactions in each situation. What is optimal depends not only on situational demands but also on the criterion measure. For example, if one is interested in enhancing subjective well-being, then a high level of positivity is preferred (Fredrickson, 2009). However, if one is interested in developing resilience, then a high level of negativity may be necessary (Frankl, 1946/1985; Wong, 2009b).

The following hypotheses can provide a rich and comprehensive account of what makes life worth living. These hypotheses also have the heuristic value of generating new ideas for research and application.

Mindful Awareness Hypothesis

The mindful awareness system is primarily concerned with the self-regulation of attention and emotional reactions while we are not actively engaged in approach or avoidance activities (Chapter 12, this volume). By focusing on what is happening while it is happening, we become more attuned to the immediate environment. Mindful awareness clears your mind so that you can hear and see more clearly (Chapter 4, this volume). Mindful awareness is like a master regulation system that monitors what is going on in all waking hours. It explores and appraises situations with equanimity.

Mindful awareness consists of the following components: openness, compassion, empathy, acceptance, and nonjudgment (OCEAN; Siegel, 2007). It is hypothesized that any exercise, meditation, or personal development that enhances mindful awareness will decrease negative reactivity and increase positive reactivity, thereby increasing one's capacity to cope and enjoy life.

Openness We know that openness to new experiences is an adaptive personality trait because it opens up more opportunities for learning and personal growth. Openness allows you to be aware of things that you want to avoid because of past experiences or cultural biases (Chapters 12 and 15, this volume). Openness also makes it more likely that we will discern our responsibility to the situation (Frankl, 1946/1985). More important, by being mindful of what is happening here and now, we may be surprised by joy.

Compassion The literature has made it abundantly clear that others matter and that relationships are key to meaning and happiness (Chapters 4, 11, and 16, this volume). The literature also emphasizes the importance of altruism and caring for others as essential for the well-being of individuals and humanity as a whole (Chapters 9, 11, and 13, this volume). A compassionate person seeks to understand without prejudice or hostility what other people are saying (Chapter 12, this volume). In meaning research, self-transcendence or altruism is one of the main avenues to meaning (Wong, 1998b). The essential ingredient for positive relationships and altruism is compassion (Chapters 9 and 18, this volume). In a broader sense, compassion means being kind to all living things as well as to oneself. Compassion enables one to be willingly vulnerable in order to reach out to help others.

Empathy Empathy is related to compassion. We are neurologically programmed to feel other people's emotions. Empathy can also be cultivated by recognizing the universality of existential concerns and human problems. All human beings struggle with predicaments of loneliness, meaninglessness, and fear of death. Empathy allows us to be emotionally and relationally attuned to the people we interact with on a day-to-day basis (Chapters 12, 18, and 19, this volume). Without empathy, we would not be able to bridge the gaps between people.

Acceptance Acceptance is the key to all three regulation systems. For the approach system, we need to accept the limitations of our own abilities and resources before setting life goals. In the avoidance system, we need to accept the reality of negative events that cannot be avoided. According to ABCDE, acceptance is the first necessary step to recovery and healing. In mindful awareness, acceptance also means that we recognize the inevitable presence of negative thoughts and negative emotions (Chapter 12, this volume). This

mental preparedness to accept and confront negativity reduces unnecessary suffering and makes it more likely for us to devote our energy toward productive work. Without acceptance, we would have to spend a great deal of time and energy defending ourselves against inevitable negative emotions, thoughts, and experiences (Chapter 10, this volume). In fact, the wisdom of acceptance is one of the main ingredients of tragic optimism (Wong, 2009b).

Nonjudgment A nonjudgmental attitude is related to the previous four elements of mindful awareness. Nonjudgment does not mean that we suspend our cognitive function of appraising whether or not a situation or person is dangerous or harmful, nor does it mean that we lose our moral sense of discriminating between right and wrong (Chapters 12 and 15, this volume). It does mean, however, that at the initial orienting phase we attempt to see and hear what is actually happening without the blinkers of our own biases. When we are first exposed to a situation or a new person, we should observe with mindful awareness and without judgment. This is the most rational and helpful way for us to have a sense of what is going on before forming judgment with respect to adaptive implications and potentials of meaning.

Our ability to make life worth living is compromised when we (a) focus exclusively on the negative aspects of life; (b) focus exclusively on the positive aspects of life (Baumeister, 1989; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenaur, & Vohs, 2001; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002); and (c) ignore the “neutral resting” state, a state wherein one is not actively engaged in problem solving or goal striving (Mason et al., 2007). In the resting state, the mind is relaxed, open, exploratory, and orienting to new stimuli but is still responding to whatever happens while it is happening. Mindfulness exercises also help the mind to remain focused and calm, thus reducing agony and over-reactions (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002; Siegel, 2007).

The Duality Hypothesis

Most people in positive psychology recognize the positive potential of negative events. For example, character strengths and fulfillment often involve overcoming adversities (Chapters 13, 23, and 25, this volume). The duality hypothesis posits that optimal outcomes depend on the interaction between the approach and avoidance systems. A number of studies can be conducted to test the duality hypothesis, namely, that a combination of positive and negative interventions is more likely to yield better outcomes than either positive or negative methods alone. For example, asking people to write about their pleasant and unpleasant life events should lead to more mental health benefits than asking them to write only about either positive or negative events. Similarly, enhancing one’s strengths and correcting one’s weaknesses will lead to greater improvement than focusing on only strengths or only weaknesses. According to the duality hypothesis, we should move beyond pitching the

positive against the negative. The future of positive psychology should focus on how to make positives and negatives work together to yield optimal results (Wong, in press-a).

The Deep-and-Wide Hypothesis

Most psychologists do not realize the full extent of adaptive potentials from confronting and overcoming negative conditions. My research has identified at least four ways whereby frustration can contribute to adaptive success and personal growth (Wong, 1979, 1995).

1. Setbacks or failure can arouse an individual or team members to give their all in order to achieve success.
2. Desperation can lead to ingenuity and resourcefulness. When confronted with a seemingly intractable problem, people tend to dig deeper into their inner resources and come up with ingenious solutions.
3. Prolonged frustration can result in a broader search for alternatives and a major change of life direction.
4. The experience of overcoming progressively more difficult tasks or enduring increasing levels of frustration can result in higher frustration tolerance or a higher breaking point. We can learn generalized behavioral persistence and flexibility in the face of setbacks and adversity through intermittent reinforcement schedules (Amsel, 1992; McCuller, Wong, & Amsel, 1976; Wong, 1995, 2006).

The behavioral mechanisms in various stages of coping with frustration can become the basis for learned dispositions or character traits. Empirical evidence and practical implications of dispositional learning can be found in Amsel (1992) and Wong (1995). These findings are important for developing resilience in children as well as in adults.

The Breaking-Point Hypothesis

Both the duality hypothesis and the deep-and-wide hypothesis imply the existence of a breaking point beyond which negativity is no longer beneficial. For example, when the desire to avoid failure becomes overwhelming, avoidance will replace approach rather than enhance it. Similarly, when the deep-and-wide coping strategy fails to improve the condition, learned helplessness will set in (Wong, 1979, 1995, 2006). Although everyone has a breaking point, individuals can vary a great deal in how much they can tolerate before they become helpless. McCuller, Wong, and Amsel (1976) have shown that through progressive-rat training, one can greatly increase the amount of frustration animals can tolerate. This finding is also relevant to humans. Wong (2009a) has made the case that Chinese people's capacity for endurance

comes from their personal and national history of having to endure and overcome hardships. Learned optimism depends on both a high breaking point and explanatory styles (Peterson, 2000; Seligman, 1990).

Seery, Holman, and Silver (2010) have documented that a history of moderate amount of adversity leads to better mental health than either a high history or no history of adversity. The U-shaped quadratic relationship between adversity and well-being can be predicted by the breaking-point hypothesis. What does not kill us makes us stronger only when the adversity does not reach the breaking point. An examination of individual data of the Seery et al. study may reveal that some individuals may still enjoy good mental health even after a large amount of prior exposure to adversity.

The Meaning-Mindset Hypothesis

Mindset refers to one's overarching motivations and worldviews. The meaning mindset focuses on the person (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1995) as meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. It also capitalizes on the human capacity for reflection and awakening (Wong, 2007). It is built on the PURE principle. An enduring passion for living comes from commitment to a higher purpose. Understanding refers to making sense of the self, life, and one's place in the world, as well as the mysteries of life. The ability to articulate one's worldview and assumptions enables us to make positive changes. A sense of responsibility ensures that the individual will behave as an instrumental and moral agent. Joy comes from living meaningfully and authentically, relatively free from circumstances and fleeting emotions.

A meaning mindset also means living a balanced life because meaning comes from several sources, among them achievement, relationships, altruism, spirituality, and justice (Wong, 1998b, 2011). The challenge is to provide both road signs and practical tools for individuals to facilitate their quest for personal transformation and fulfillment.

All great reformers, visionaries, or missionaries—for example, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Hudson Taylor—have a meaning mindset rather than a happiness mindset. If we could teach people to embrace a meaning mindset, then our society would be better. The main prediction is that individuals who choose a meaning orientation are more likely to experience eudaimonic happiness but less hedonic happiness. Furthermore, they are more likely to be resilient because suffering becomes more bearable when we suffer for a cause.

The meaning mindset is of fundamental importance because it reflects one's philosophy of life, ultimate concern, core values, and worldview and is the overarching motivation in one's life. This mindset is related to character strengths, personal meaning, passion for excellence, moral judgment, altruism, volunteerism, business ethics, religiosity, spirituality, prosocial behaviors, resilience, and all kinds of good things that make life worth living. Training in

developing meaning mindset can also serve as an educational tool to combat addiction, violence, and other antisocial behaviors.

For idealists who embrace a meaning mindset, the good life lies in the heroic struggle to realize an ideal. Their life satisfaction is beyond pleasure and pain; it is beyond success and failure. The meaning mindset makes sense of the self and one's place in life throughout the ups and downs of the path one has chosen. Life satisfaction is based not on calculating the ratio between positives and negatives but on beliefs, values, and a whole-hearted dedication to a worthy mission, regardless of the outcome.

We can also predict that meaning-minded individuals are more likely to be motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations (Chapter 4, this volume) and by commitment to long-term missions (Chapter 8, this volume). Krause (Chapter 19, this volume) explains why a meaning mindset is important for persistence and resilience:

Having a sense of purpose in life and goals to pursue helps people deal with adversity by enhancing their sense of hope or optimism. A goal or plan instills the belief that no matter how bleak things may seem at the moment, there is still a way to get through these difficulties, and if these goals or plans are executed faithfully, hard times will eventually subside.

Conclusion

The 21st century may be called a century of meaning in which people are struggling to recover a sense of meaning and purpose in the midst of international terrorism and the global financial meltdown. The creation of a new world order and a more cooperative and humane society will demand a grassroots campaign to educate people about the importance of responsible and purposeful living. In this endeavor, this book is intended to provide the framework for meaning-based education.

In an age of anxiety, Rachman (2011) suggests that, for positive psychology to resonate with people, it needs to recognize anxiety as an existential given and emphasize the human capacity for meaning transformation. The dual-system model gets to the heart of the human struggle of trying to move forward to achieve worthy live goals while attempting to overcome external and internal constraints that threaten to make life miserable and hopeless. The dual-systems model provides a conceptual framework to integrate both positive and negative psychology. The central message of the dual-systems model is that too much emphasis on either approach or avoidance can be maladaptive. Life surges forward, driven by the motivations to preserve and expand oneself—two fundamental biological needs. Individuals can survive and flourish better when they manage to meet these basic needs through meaning-based self-regulations. The dual-systems model also integrates psychotherapy with

positive psychology in a comprehensive and coherent manner. The interactive dynamics of meaning processes not only address clients' predicaments but also facilitate their quests for happiness.

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