

## **A Brief Introduction to Meaning-Centered Existential Therapy**

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In the past 10 years, many of my friends in the existential circle have asked me: “What is meaning therapy? How is it different from existential therapy?” I believe that part of the reason for this persistent questioning is that, in their minds, existential therapy is about the meaning of human existence. Therefore, why the need for meaning therapy? After all, Van Deurzen and Adams (2011) have clearly stated that the motivation for meaning and purpose is central to existential therapy.

This brief article will serve as a brief introduction to meaning therapy (MT) and give readers some ideas about the scope and complexity of this new approach to existential therapy. On the one hand, MT still maintains all the traditional existential theme of empowering clients to live more authentic and vital lives in spite of the bleak human condition; on the other hand, MT is evidence-based, positive, integrative, cross-cultural, spiritual, and relational. These characteristics will hopefully make existential therapy more attractive and relevant to the younger generations of therapists and clients, who favour a more scientific and less philosophical approach to psychotherapy.

### **It is Evidence-Based**

At a time when society demands evidence-based therapy, one of the advantages of MT is that it can incorporate the many measurements and interventions based on the burgeoning research on the positive psychology of meaning (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012; Wong, 2012a, in press). In MT, our understanding of the phenomenological-hermeneutic data is enhanced by quantitative data based on valid and reliable psychological measurements. For example, we can use Wong’s Personal Meaning Profile (PMP; Wong, 1998a) to help identify what really matters to the client.

Similarly, the repertoire of our intervention tools can be increased by including evidence-based activities. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) and writing about one’s life (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006) are examples of evidence-based positive interventions. The main intervention strategies for meaning therapy are PURE (which stands for purpose, understanding, responsibility, and enjoyment) and ABCDE (which stands for acceptance, belief, commitment, discovery, and evaluation). Together, these two strategies can be used seamlessly to promote healing and flourishing (Wong, 2012b,c).

While we value evidence-based measurements and interventions to enhance meaningfulness and well-being, we are fully aware that science has its limitations. Those who try to explain the meaning of life and death purely in scientific terms simply succeed in reducing the richness and mystery of human existence to barren physical terms. In meaning therapy, we make good use of both the philosophical literature and scientific studies of meaning and well-being.

### **It is Positive**

Traditional approaches to existential therapy focus on how to relate to existential anxiety with freedom and responsibility; its starting point is meaninglessness and groundlessness. In contrast, MT emphasizes

meaning-seeking as the primary human motivation and the most effective way to confront and transcend existential anxieties. In other words, my starting point is affirmation of meaning and value in life (Frankl, 1985; Wong, 2005).

I follow Viktor Frankl in making this important strategic switch in order to serve the dual purpose of therapy and counselling: the amelioration of suffering and symptoms and the enhancement of well-being and human functioning. My emphasis on the human quest for meaning has another advantage. It provides a distinct vision about what constitutes the good life. Different from all those who emphasize hedonic happiness and strengths-based personal success, I have stressed meaning-based Eudaimonic happiness and a much broader vision of harmony, peace, and justice, in the global village.

### It is Integrative

Integrative is probably the single defining attribute of MT, which provides not only a bridge between therapy and meaning research, but also a conceptual framework to organically incorporate the various therapeutic modalities that service the different aspects of the person, such as the unconscious self, the narrative self, etc. The following graph represents my attempt to illustrate the various psychological components of meaning.

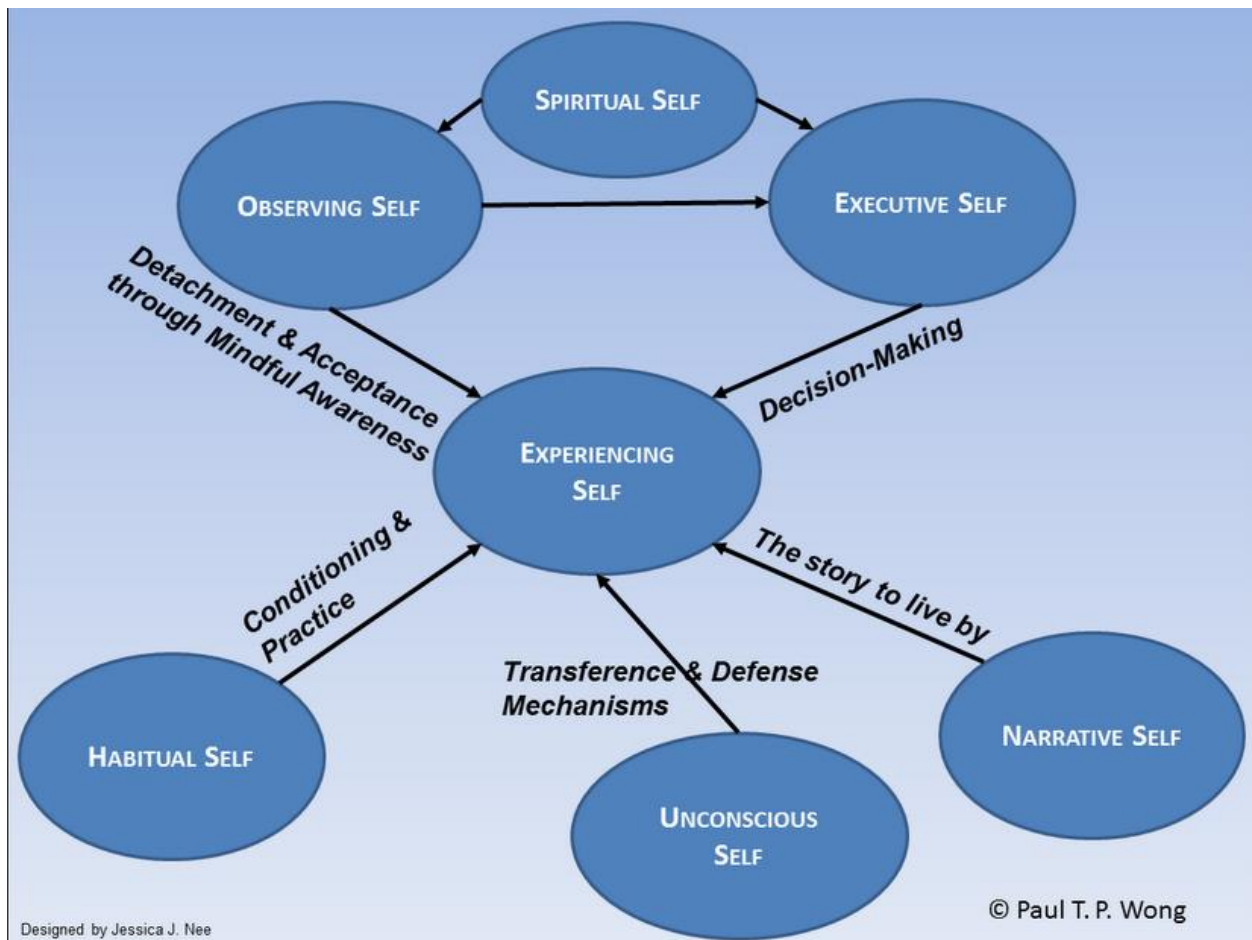


Figure 1. Effective use of multiple selves in meaning therapy.

The different selves in this figure represent different dimensions of the complex, evolving meaning system, which represents our self-concept. For example, the executive self is essentially the rational and intelligent self that makes most of the major decisions in life. It is the rational self that appraises a situation based on the raw data from the experiencing self and decides whether it is harmful or beneficial. The experiencing self refers to our moment to moment lived experience. The narrative self refers to the story we live by. The unconscious self provides all kinds of material for MT, such as dreams and transference, the meaning of which cannot be understood without contribution from psychoanalysis. The habitual self reflects all the habitual patterns and reflex-like responses that we have acquired through past conditioning and present reinforcement contingencies. Without the observing self, our perception of actual experiences can be distorted by our over-identification with the narrative, habitual, or unconscious selves.

In the practice of mindful awareness, the observing self not only directly and non-judgementally observes our moment to moment lived experience, but also observes ourselves reflectively – our life as a whole and our Being in the world. Given our vast mental capacity, we can both pay attention to the immediate present and at the same time reflect on the big picture from the vantage point of our spiritual self. We are able to minimize the interference from our totalitarian ego and biases, only when we see things as they are unfolding, and when we decide on our responses based on reflecting on our spiritual values. In this double-vision strategy, we integrate both the minute details of the present moment and the much larger spiritual considerations of our decisions.

The observing self challenges Cartesian dualism; you can observe your own thoughts, feelings, and life experiences as a non-judging observer, without over-identifying with your own biases. Mindful awareness includes observing what is happening both inside and outside you. It is through mindful awareness of your inner world of meaning and feelings that you are able to bypass the obstacles to true self-knowledge and self-understanding; this provides the foundation for MT. The capacity for self-reflection or self-awareness is the most precious endowment; it gives us the ultimate freedom to transcend all deterministic forces, including a poor self-concept from an invalidating past, and to choose to become our best self.

The genius of Viktor Frankl (1985) was that he practiced mindfulness before mindfulness became fashionable. He taught us to observe the present moment reflectively in order to create some space between the situation and our habitual way of reacting. When we do this, we are able to listen to our inner voice of conscience and spiritual values rather than follow our instincts, unconscious impulses and old habits automatically.

One is able to make good choices only when one's decisions are guided by the observing self and the spiritual self, rather than by the habitual, unconscious, and narrative selves. The multiple selves all function within the physical self because all human experiences, such as feelings, thoughts, and self-reflections, are embodied experiences.

## **It is Spiritual**

I have already alluded to the central role of the spiritual self. Frankl referred to logotherapy as spiritual therapy, because the will to meaning (the motivation to pursue self-transcendence) is situated in the spiritual dimension, which is the very core of the human personality. He further characterizes human existence in terms of spirituality, freedom, and responsibility. Likewise, MT emphasizes that the essence of being fully human is to devote one's life to pursuing self-transcendence, which is to serve a higher purpose for the common good (Wong, in press). Similarly, Van Deurzen and Adams (2011) state, "In the sense that life is about meaning creating, the spiritual dimension is the central axis of existential therapy" (p. 20).

### **It is Cross-Cultural**

To the extent that meaning is both individually and socially constructed, one's meaning systems are inevitably shaped by one's historical and sociocultural background. Culture has a profound and pervasive influence on people's behaviors and attitudes. We cannot understand clients' behaviors and attitudes apart from their meaning systems and cultural backgrounds (Arthur & Pedersen, 2008). We cannot fully understand the meaning of behaviors unless it is viewed at all levels of the ecological context. An ecological approach enables us to understand the existential-phenomenological experiences of individuals in their interactions with the different contexts of their life circumstances.

In a multicultural society, personal meaning systems necessarily evolve through the long struggle of navigating the cross-currents of different cultures. Therefore, sensitivity, understanding, and knowledge of such struggles are essential to MT. MT employs macrocounseling skills because behavior is always situated in an ecological context, which includes macrosystems such as culture, race, gender, history, and the human condition.

### **It is Relational**

Another crucial element of MT is the centrality of relationships to healing, meaning, and well-being (Wong & Wong, 2013). This basic tenet is based on the need to belong, which is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and is the key to effective therapy (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2009; Norcross, 2002).

In MT, the relationship goes beyond mere therapeutic alliance; it is an authentic encounter that reaches the deepest level of common humanity between two individuals. Therapeutic change necessarily involves some form of exchange of life, resulting in reciprocal change in both parties in the counseling setting. The therapist is the most important instrument in the entire therapeutic process. In addition to addressing interpersonal issues experienced by clients (Weissman, Markowitz, & Klerman, 2000) and capitalizing on the here-and-now interactions as the basis for diagnosis and therapy (Yalom, 1980), MT seeks to enhance clients' positive meanings through fostering positive client-therapist relationships.

### **Conclusion**

In this brief introduction, I have demonstrated that MT is a very flexible, dynamic, and practical way of doing existential therapy that makes effective use of multiple selves. This integrative approach makes

sense in today's global village, because no psychotherapy can be applied as one-size-fits-all. As an integrative approach, meaning therapy can be effectively applied to almost every single case, by virtue of its flexibility and multimodality.

Over the past thirty years, I have written extensively on how I integrate logotherapy with various modalities of psychotherapy, such as CBT, narrative therapy, mindfulness, and positive psychotherapy (e.g., Wong, 1997; 2006; 2008a; 2012b,c). I have devoted more than three decades to doing meaning research (Wong & Weiner, 1981; Wong & Fry, 1998; Wong, 2012a) and meaning-centered counselling and therapy (Wong, 1997, 1998b, 1999, 2012b; Wong & Wong, 2013). Those who are interested in learning more can look up my earlier publications.

In conclusion, MT can be summarized by its motto: "Meaning is all we have, relationship is all we need." Although MT advocates the person-centered and holistic approach of working with all aspects of the person, it emphasizes the meaning dimension. The advantage of this approach is that it makes full use of the vast literature on meaning research and helps move existential therapy to the mainstream of evidence-based psychotherapy.

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