

Acceptance & Well-being: A Meaning-Management Perspective

©Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., C. Psych

*Presented at Lotus Hospice Care Foundation, Taiwan
October 2013*

Overview

1. The Role of Acceptance in Well-Being
2. Adaptive Functions of Acceptance
3. Acceptance in Psychotherapy
4. A Meaning-Management Perspective

Part 1: The Role of Acceptance in Well-Being

Two Kinds of Enlightenment

Western

- Renaissance
- Modernist
- Rational
- Science & technology
- Tools & skills

Eastern

- Buddhism
- Postmodernist
- Spiritual
- Awareness & Acceptance
- Inner Enlightenment

A New Paradigm for Truth Claims

- Recognizes the limitations of rationality and science in solving the problems of suffering
- Discovers a new method of knowing by directly observing our experiences
- Discovers the wisdom or truth that everything in life is impermanent or transitory
- Discovers the freedom of detachment

Four Noble Truths

- The truth of *dukkha* (suffering, anxiety, unsatisfactoriness)
- The truth of the origin of *dukkha*
- The truth of the cessation of *dukkha*
- The truth of the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*

The Nature of Enlightenment

“The nature of our mind is very pure. It has the qualities of clarity and knowing. Buddhists call the Buddha Nature “the mind of clear light” (Enlightenment) where no negative thoughts or emotions arise. It shines through if we are quieting all abstract concepts and thoughts and become aware of the underlying stillness of the mind directly.”

(The Dalai Lama's Guide to Happiness)

Broad Definition of Well-Being

1. Positive Emotions
2. Meaning & Purpose
3. Love & Relationships
4. High levels of cognitive & physical functioning
5. Acceptance of existential problems

Types of Well-Being

- Hedonic well-being
- Eudaimonic well-being
- Spiritual/existential well-being
- Psychological well-being
- Physical well-being
- Social well-being
- Economic well-being

Wong's (1998) Implicit Theory of the Good Life

1. Acceptance
2. Achievement
3. Relationship
4. Intimacy
5. Self-transcendence
6. Religion/Spirituality
7. Fair treatment (social justice)
8. Positive emotions

Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being

1. Autonomy
2. Environmental mastery
3. Personal growth
4. Positive relations with others
5. Purpose in life
6. **Self-acceptance**

Keyes & Magyar-Moe's Model of Social Well-Being

1. Social integration
2. Social contribution
3. Coherence
4. Actualization
- 5. Acceptance**

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of Well-Being

- Positive emotions
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning
- Achievement

Negative Perceptions of Acceptance

- The adaptive value of acceptance not widely recognized in positive psychology
- Not generally perceived as positive emotion
- Not considered as a proactive and effective way of coping
- Associated with personal weakness, passivity, helplessness, resignation

The Positive Psychology of Acceptance

- Acceptance and mindfulness
- Acceptance, compassion and tolerance
- Acceptance as a component of well-being
- Acceptance as a coping strategy
- Self-acceptance
- Death-acceptance
- Acceptance and commitment therapy

Three Types of Death Acceptance

(Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994)

1. **Neutral** - facing death rationally as an inevitable end of every life
2. **Approach** - accepting death as a gateway to a better afterlife
3. **Escape** - choosing death as a better alternative to a painful existence

Subscale of Acceptance

(Part of the *Coping Schemas Inventory-Revised*)

- Accept what has happened because eventually things will work out as well as can be expected
- Learn to live with the problem, because nothing much can be done about it
- Accept/tolerate life as it is and make the best of it
- Learn to accept the negative realities of life
- Look at unavoidable life events as part of my lot in life

Subscale of Acceptance (cont'd)

(Part of the *Coping Schemas Inventory-Revised*)

- Accept the present situation because no matter how bad things are they could always be worse
- Avoid thinking about the problem or things that are upsetting
- Look at the humorous side of this problem
- Don't worry about the past or the future, accept each day as it comes

Part 2: Adaptive Functions of Acceptance

Pathways of Acceptance through Authenticity & Eudaimonia

1. Serve as a starting point for positive change.
2. Reflect on self to facilitate unconditional self-acceptance.
3. Develop one's true self or authenticity.
4. Experience eudaimonia by living according one's true self.

Pathways of Acceptance through Positive Relationships

- Accept others based on empathy and the reality that we are all fellow human beings sharing the same boat in a sea of suffering.
- Contribute to mutual trust and understanding
- Provide the basis for unconditional positive regard
- Enhance genuineness & authenticity
- Contribute to mindful interactions
- Contribute to community development

Pathways of Acceptance through Tragic Optimism

- Acceptance of the worst
- Affirmation of the value and meaning of life
- Self-transcendence (altruism)
- Faith in God and others
- Courage to face adversity

Pathways of Acceptance through Mindful Awareness

Accepting the Here and Now

- Mindfulness awareness is a state of mind, a mindset
- OCEAN: Openness, Compassion, Empathy, Acceptance & Non-judgment
- Facilitate self-awareness and self-understanding
- Make us more aware of others and connections
- Stress reduction, emotion regulation, and relaxation
- Transform negative emotions and suffering
- Increase inner serenity and subjective well-being

Pathways of Acceptance through Mindfulness (cont'd)

Adaptive benefits of mindfulness & acceptance:

1. It avoids our habitual dependence on negative thinking.
2. It facilitates positive reappraisal.
3. It reinforces resorting to spiritual values.
4. It enables us to function much better by relating in a flexible manner to what cannot be changed.

Mindfulness & Flexibility

- Mindful awareness increases response flexibility in negative situations.
- It promotes experiential acceptance, which frees us from unnecessary avoidance responses.
- It increases the flexibility of responses.
- It increases the flexibility of goals.

Lao Tzu in Tao Te Ching on Flexibility & Humility

"Human virtue, at its best, is like water, which nurtures all things quietly without contending with anything. It flows to places despised by all, yet by staying there, it stays close to Tao [the Way]."

Pathways of Acceptance through Doing Nothing & Letting Go

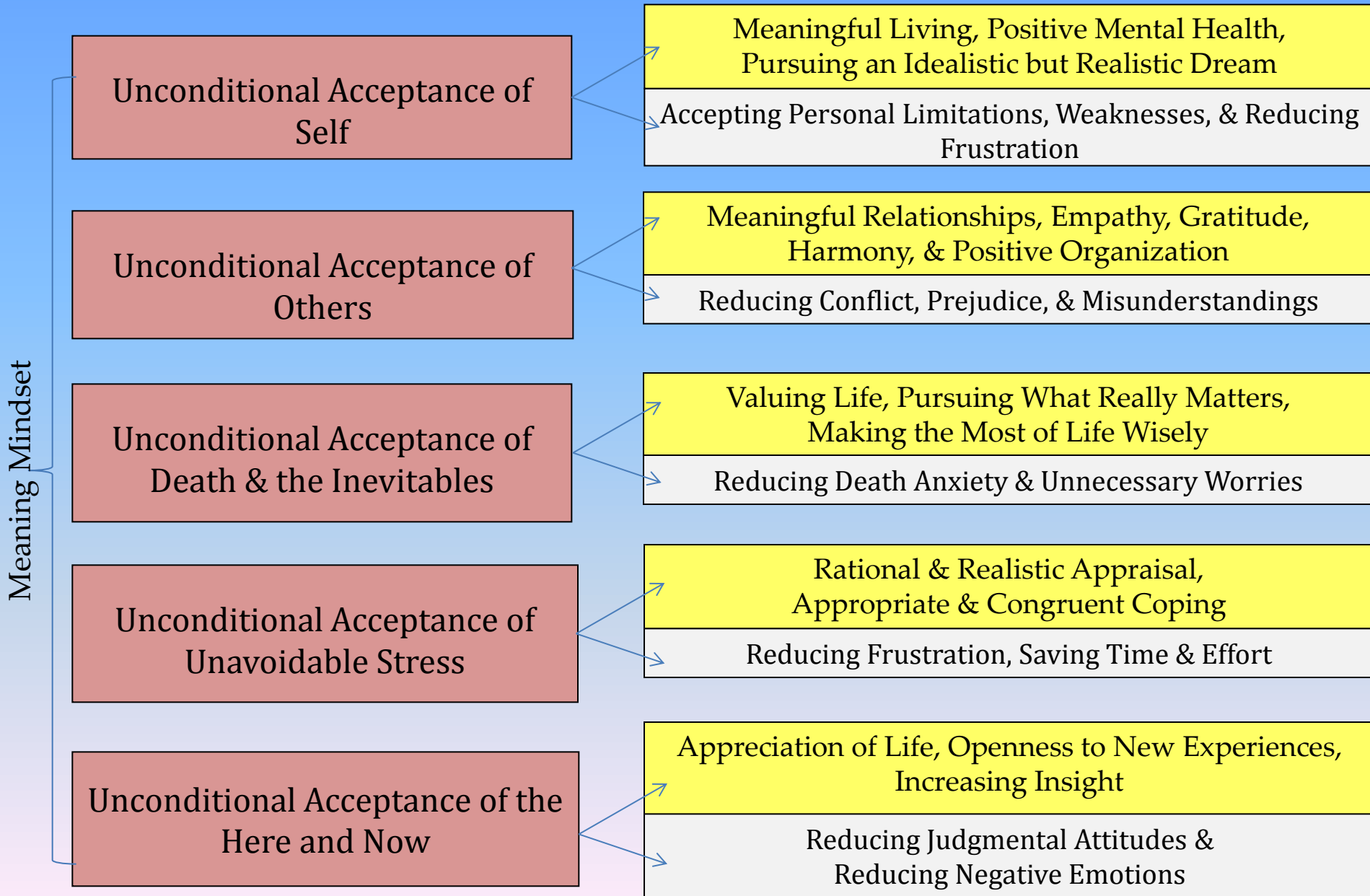
Accepting What Cannot Be Changed: Wisdom Energy conservation

- Learned helplessness or acceptance of reality
- Learn when to disengage and let go
- Conservation of energy & reduction of stress
- Learned wisdom, flexibility & creativity
- Serenity prayer
- The way of the water

Pathways of Acceptance through Confronting Existential Anxieties

- Learning to live with fear of personal mortality
- Recognize the fragility and finitude of life
- Learn to live with one's limitations and the existential anxiety
- Make the most of one's brief life by living authentically & passionately
- Overcome death anxiety through faith, meaning-making, & relationship

Pathways to Well-Being



Part 3: Acceptance in Psychotherapy

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

- First developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (1990)
- “To cultivate the healing power of mindfulness requires much more than mechanically following a recipe or a set of instructions.” (p. 31)
- “To cultivate the meditative awareness requires an entirely new way of looking at the process of learning.” (p. 31)

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT)

- Developed by Paul Gilbert, *Compassion Focused Therapy: Distinctive Features* (2010)
- It draws from evolutionary, social, developmental and Buddhist psychology, and neuroscience.
- It focuses on compassionate mind training to help people develop inner warmth and safeness, through the practice of compassion and self-compassion.
- It emphasizes self-acceptance as a basis for compassion.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson (2011)
- Teaches you mindfulness skills to deal with pain & suffering by
 1. Accepting what is beyond your control
 2. Committing to action according to your core values
 3. Emphasizing response-flexibility and perspective-taking

The Primacy of Experience in ACT

- “My experience is what I agree to attend to”
(William James, 1890)
- The subjective and phenomenological experience of thinking, feeling, & subverbal consciousness is the only raw material for psychology.
- However, to make sense of our experience, we are often influenced by our past history.

Defeating the Totalitarian Self

- Only mindful awareness can help us to detach from the tyranny of egotistic habits.
- Mindfulness is the foundation for self-transcendence, which allows us to become aware of the human condition and the common humanity.
- Mindfulness leads to compassion, which is the best antidote to the totalitarian self.

The Down Side of Focusing on Positive Emotions

- The problems of painful life conditions and existential anxieties still remain.
- Temporary positive distractions will simply delay the need to confront and solve real problems.
- Confronting problems and feeling despair may serve the positive purpose of awakening the individual.
- People may continue their self-handicapping behaviours.

Pain & Fear

- Both are essential to survival and existence.
- But we cannot allow pain & fear to control us and define our existence.
- We need to learn how to relate to them with acceptance and compassion.
- “...it may require questioning our own systems of what it means to be human. It may mean that values and virtues trump feeling good.”
(Walser, 2013, p. 72)

Acceptance of Painful Events

Acceptance of a painful event can reduce such negative emotions as fear, anxiety, and wanting to avoid.

- It opens up some space for us to listen to the intuitive conscience regarding what to do.
- It allows us to seek guidance from our core values and higher purpose.
- It reminds us of the need for compassion because of our universal human condition.

Value Clarification

- Values represent “your heart’s deepest desires for how you want to behave as a human being,” according to Russ Harris.
- What is your deepest desire and why?
- What is your concept of being and behaving as a human being?
- How do your values guide your ongoing actions?

Three Levels of Values

- 1. Self-serving values** – Self-enhancement & self-protection
- 2. Group-serving values** – Defending & expanding the interest of one's own group
- 3. Self-transcendent values** – Serving the values of our common humanity as an end in itself

Part 4: A Meaning-Management Perspective

Differences from ACT

- Emphasizing both the primary motivation of meaning seek & self-transcendence
- Emphasizing existential anxieties
- Assuming that spirituality is a universal aspect of humanity
- Assuming self-transcendence to be the core spiritual value for all people

3 Levels of Self-Transcendence

1. Mindful Awareness

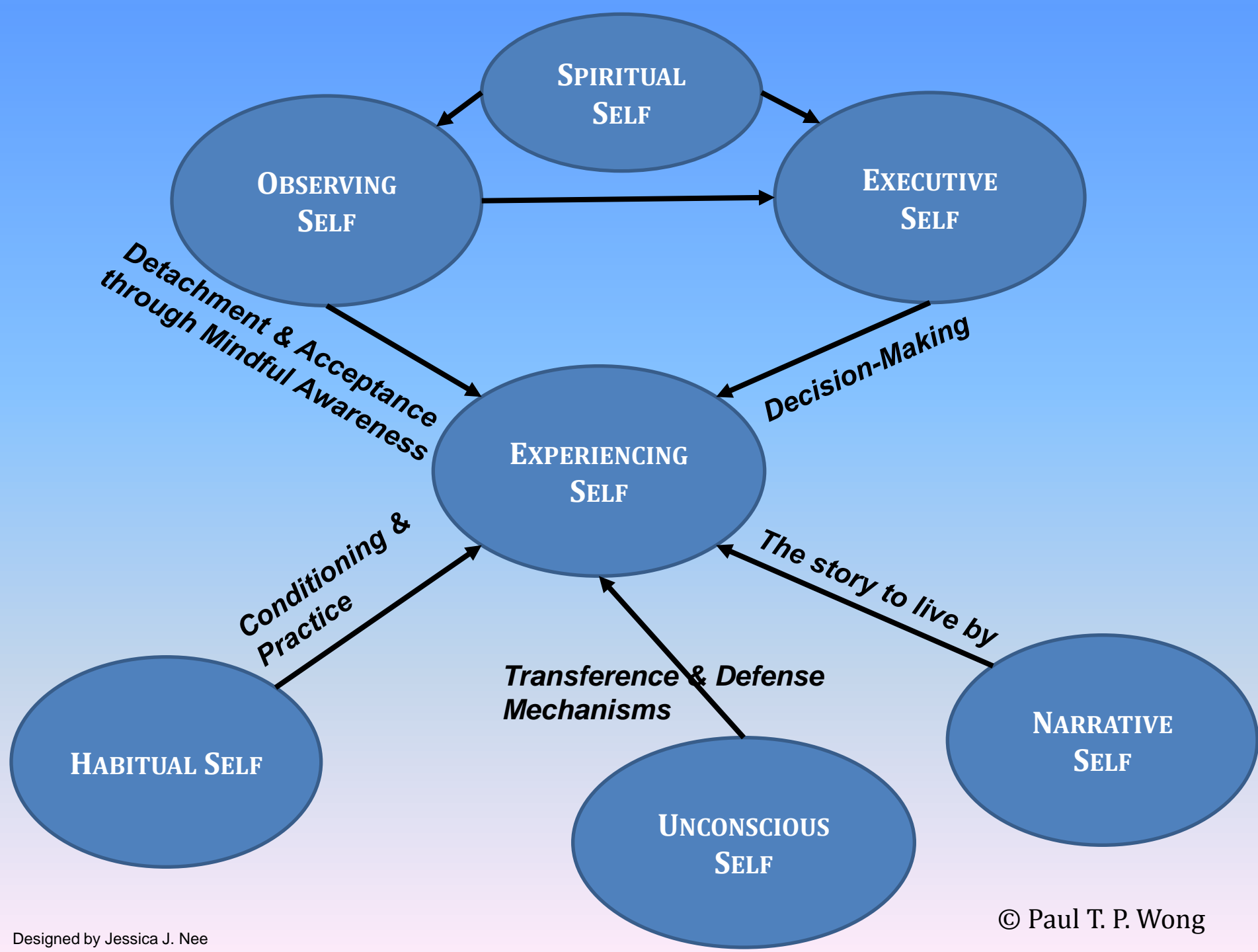
(Transcends Defense Mechanisms)

2. Setting Life Goals

(Transcends Egotistic Desires)

3. Choosing Core Values

(Transcends Material World)



Overall Objectives

- For Meaning Therapy (MT), the objective is never the removal of symptoms nor the improvement of the behaviour.
- MT always aims at helping the client to become a fully functioning human in spite of life's problems and predicaments.
- To attain self-transcendence is to become fully human.
- Happiness and success are a by-product of self-transcendence.
- Acceptance of painful emotions and conditions is only a part of an overall life attitude of accepting life in totality.

Therapeutic Goals

- To awaken the client's sense of responsibility and meaning.
- To achieve a deeper understanding of the problem from a larger perspective.
- To help the client discover their true identity and place in the world.
- To help the client pursue what really matters in life.

Therapeutic Goals (cont'd)

- To develop the client's full potential.
- To make life better for self & others.
- To transform a victim's journey into a hero's adventure.
- To discover meaning and hope in boundary situations.
- To transform negatives into positives through meaning seeking/making

Assumptions of Meaning Therapy

- People are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures
- We live in a world of meaning.
- The meaning we attribute to events affect us more than the events themselves
- The human capacity for meaning offers them the best protection against threats and losses and the best means to achieve complete well-being.

The Motto of Meaning Therapy

Meaning is all we have; relationship is all we need.

- Human beings are meaning seeking/meaning making beings, living in a world of meaning.
- Relationship is all we need to help clients:
 - Relationship itself heals.
 - How to relate to self & others is the basis for healthy living.

The Therapeutic Presence

- Who we are is more important than what we say.
- Rogers' three pre-conditions need to be the personal characteristics of counsellors.
- Personal wholeness of the therapist is important.
- The messenger is the message.
- The therapist is the therapy.
- The counsellor brings a healing presence.
- The counsellor models meaningful living.
- The counsellor practices counselling by osmosis.

The ABCDE Strategy

- ***Accept*** and confront the reality -- *the reality principle.*
- ***Believe*** that life is worth living – *the faith principle.*
- ***Commit*** to goals and actions – *the action principle.*
- ***Discover*** the meaning and significance of self and situations – *the Aha! principle.*
- ***Evaluate*** the above – *the self-regulation principle.*

Levels of Acceptance

- Cognitive acceptance
- Emotional acceptance
- Realistic acceptance
- Integrative acceptance
- Existential acceptance
- Transcendental acceptance
- Transformative acceptance

Meaning-Management Theory

Definition

- Meaning management refers to how we manage meaning-seeking, meaning-making, and meaning reconstruction in order to survive and flourish
- Meaning management focuses on acceptance and self-regulation of our inner life (e.g., consciousness & intentionality)

Meaning-Seeking & Acceptance

Self-Acceptance	Other Acceptance	Death Acceptance	Stress Acceptance	Acceptance of the Here & Now
Who am I? What was I meant to be?	What is on their mind?	What is the point of striving?	Why now?	What am I experiencing?
What matters most in my life?	What are they really saying?	What happens after death?	What's the purpose of this happening?	Is there anything new?
What is my mission & purpose in life?	What do they want from me?	How is my death different from the death of an animal?	What's the meaning of suffering & loss?	Explore my curiosities
In what ways am I unique?	What is their perspective?	How can I die a good death?	How can I benefit from this experience?	Be attentive to my surroundings
How can I make a difference?	What are their cultural values?	What is a good death?	How could God allow this to happen?	Be attuned to spiritual experiences
Where am I headed? What are my options?	What are their aspirations?	What is worth dying for?	Is God punishing me?	Be fully aware of changes
What are my strengths & weaknesses?	What are their fears and hopes?	Is that all there is to life?	Is this cruel fate? Is this bad luck?	Learn to be focused in listening and observing
How can I live a worthy life?	How can I be of help to them?	What is the meaning of death?	Will the pain ever end?	Make sense of my subjective experiences
What is the good life in spite of all my misfortunes?	How can we better understand each other?	How can I make my death a meaningful event?	Is this a warning sign for me to change my life?	Is this a meaningful moment?
Is this my fate?	What is our common destiny?	What are the existential givens?	Is it possible to live without stress?	The stress will soon pass away.

Meaning-Making & Acceptance

Self-Acceptance	Other Acceptance	Death Acceptance	Stress Acceptance	Acceptance of the Here & Now
Discover meaning through creative work	Discover meaning through relating	Discover meaning through awareness of my mortality	Discover meaning through a heroic attitude	Discover meaning through experiencing the present moments
Do what I love & follow my heart	Develop meaningful relationships	Leave a legacy	Discover the meaning & benefits of pain	Practice mindful awareness
Do what I can do best	Engage in meaningful activities with other	Make a difference in the world	Discover hidden strengths	Practice mindfulness meditation
Be true to myself & do what is authentic	Do something meaningful together	Engage in something higher & bigger than myself	Transform negatives into positives	Attribute meanings to experiences
Do the right thing according to my conscience & values	Create shared vision & a common purpose	Practice generativity	Learn wisdom & lessons from suffering	Appraise events of personal significance
Pursue my calling in spite of obstacles	Pursue a common goal	Develop ego integrity through life review	Develop resources & support systems	Discover sacred moments in daily events
Do what's meaningful	Construe positive meanings in others	Live fully & make every day count	Deepen my faith & pray for help	Create order from chaos
Count my blessings	Express gratitude to each other	Make the most of my life	Practice altruism	Regard each present moment as a gift
Forgive myself for my mistakes & failures	Help and care for each other	Become reconciled with others	Practice self-transcendence	Become aware of effect of my choices

Meaning-Reconstruction & Acceptance

Self-Acceptance	Other Acceptance	Death Acceptance	Stress Acceptance	Acceptance of the Here & Now
Review my life & re-examine my life projects	Redefine each other's role in the relationship	Review my life & re-arrange my priorities	Reappraise the event based on experience	Look at things with a new lens
Re-author my life story	Reassess my relationships	Revise my will	Reintegrate stress with my life	Look at things from a different perspective
Revise my meaning systems in starting a new chapter of life	Explore new grounds for rebuilding the relationship	Reconcile with my estranged family members	Reinvest my energy in other areas	Develop a new mindset to look at life
Revise my self-concept	Change one's opinions & attitude about the other	Renew my relationships with old friends	Re-engage in life	Revise my cognitive schemas to assimilate new information
Integrate my past with the present	Revise the history of my relationship with the other	Re-evaluate and recommit to my faith tradition	Restore my broken dreams	Expand my knowledge & wisdom to better appreciate the present

Conclusions

- Acceptance is probably the most effective and versatile way of adaptation, capable of repairing the worst and bringing out the best in us.
- The five pathways of acceptance cover five major life domains: a) Personhood; b) Relationships; c) Existential issues; d) Stress, loss & suffering; and e) Mindfulness.
- It is an important but under-researched area in the positive psychology of well-being.

Conclusions

- The practice of acceptance enables us to become mature, responsible, positive, compassionate, and resilient individuals, who in turn contribute to the development of a positive society.
- Our ability to live fully and meaningfully regardless of circumstances depends on learning to accept the negative and unchangeable aspects of life.
- Acceptance represents the cornerstone of a balanced positive psychology.