

Introduction to Meaning Therapy

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OVERVIEW

- What is Meaning Therapy (MT)?
- Contrasting MT with Traditional Therapy
- Defining Characteristics of MT
- The Use of Multiple Selves in MT
- The Observing Self and Mindfulness
- The Spiritual Self as a Core Dimension of Humanity
- The Advantages of MT

WHAT IS MEANING THERAPY (MT)?

- MT is one of the new entries in the crowded field of psychotherapy (more than 400 types of therapy)
- MT evolved from logotherapy & existential therapy
- Existential therapy is about the meaning of human existence
- MT empowers clients to live more authentic and vital lives in spite of the bleak human condition

WHAT IS MEANING THERAPY (MT)?

(CONT'D)

- MT is nature's way to combat mental illness through enhancing people's natural capacities for meaning-making, love, work, and play
- MT empowers clients to live more freely & fully and become what they are meant to be
- MT is less concerned about feeling good and more concerned about what really matters for the individual and humanity

NEW PARADIGM VS. OLD PARADIGM

New Paradigm

1. A wounded healer
2. Clients are worthy human beings
3. A holistic approach
4. Focuses on both healing & flourishing
5. Embraces negativity
6. Nature's way to mental health

Old Paradigm

1. An expert authority
2. Clients are patients with psychological disorders
3. A component approach
4. Focuses on symptom reduction
5. Avoids negativity
6. Medical way to mental health

SPIRITUALITY VS. MATERIALISM

Spirituality

1. Transcendental orientation
2. True self is the spiritual core
3. Meaning-seeking is intrinsic & transcendental
4. Ordinary activities become spiritual
5. Life calling serves a higher purpose & greater good

Materialism

1. Worldly orientation
2. Ego is a social mask
3. Goal-striving is based on external rewards
4. Ordinary activities remain ordinary
5. Life calling is based on personal interests & strengths

EGO VS. LOGOS

Ego

1. The source of suffering
2. Kills relationships
3. Avoids pain & confusion
4. Seeks self-expansion, but results in self-destruction
5. Creates hopes that cannot endure
6. The bigger the ego, the greater the problem

Logos

1. The source of mental health
2. Builds relationships
3. Welcomes pain & confusion
4. Seeks self-death, but results in self-expansion
5. Welcomes hopelessness in order to find real hope
6. The bigger the logos, the smaller the problem

MEANING THERAPISTS VS. TRADITIONAL THERAPISTS

Meaning Therapists

1. The therapist is therapy
2. The relationship is therapeutic in itself
3. Welcome suffering as a trigger for change
4. Work from inside out
5. Spiritually-oriented
6. Spiritual activation

Traditional Therapists

1. The therapy is therapy
2. The relationship is an instrument to therapy
3. Try to reduce suffering & avoid pain
4. Work from outside in
5. Symptom-oriented
6. Behavioural activation

CRITERIA OF MENTAL HEALTH

Old Paradigm

1. Reducing of symptoms & resolving painful issues
2. Regaining ability to function & control
3. Improving relationships
4. Feeling more self-confident & in control
5. Increased life satisfaction

New Paradigm

1. Relating to problems as part of the totality of life
2. Relating to life in an open & carefree way
3. New patterns of relating
4. Feeling fearless, shameless, & helpless
5. Increased spiritual well-being

ARTIFICIAL VS. NATURAL

Artificial

1. Prescribes exercises that may not fit the person or the situation
2. Makes symptom-reduction the objective
3. Emphasizes DSM labels
4. Focuses on client's problems
5. Duality

Natural

1. Prescribes activities to meet the person's basic mental health needs
2. Makes need-fulfillment the objective
3. De-emphasizes labels
4. Also considers institutional & macro forces
5. Non-duality

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF MT

1. Evidence-based
2. Positive
3. Integrative (Holistic)
4. Cross-cultural
5. Spiritual
6. Relational

1. IT IS EVIDENCE-BASED

- APA emphasizes evidence-based psychotherapy
- This is intended to protect the general public from ineffective or fraudulent practices
- MT is evidence-based because it incorporates empirically validated therapies and practices
- The phenomenological-hermeneutic data of MT is supplemented by valid and reliable psychological measurements

1. IT IS EVIDENCE-BASED (CONT'D)

- MT makes use of a variety of evidence-based positive interventions, such as PURE and ABCDE
 - PURE: Purpose, Understanding, Responsibility, Enjoyment
 - ABCDE: Acceptance, Belief, Commitment, Discovery, Evaluation

2. IT IS POSITIVE

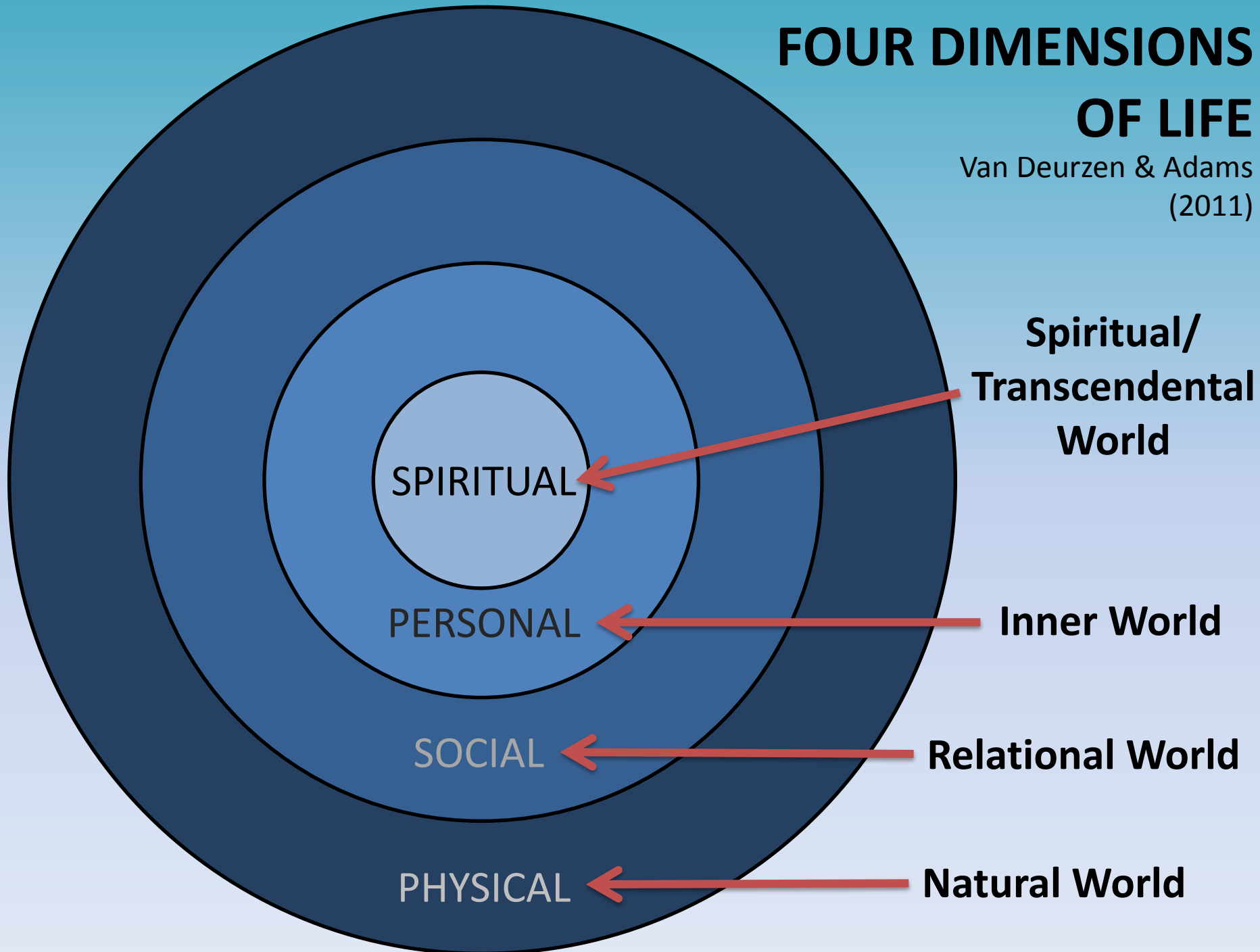
- Traditional approaches to existential therapy focus on existential anxieties such as meaninglessness & groundlessness
- MT focuses on affirmation of meaning & value in life
- MT serves the dual purpose of therapy:
 1. The amelioration of suffering and symptoms
 2. The enhancement of well-being and human functioning
- MT offers a distinct vision about what constitutes the good life:
 1. Meaning-based Eudaimonic happiness
 2. A broader vision of harmony, peace, & justice in the global village

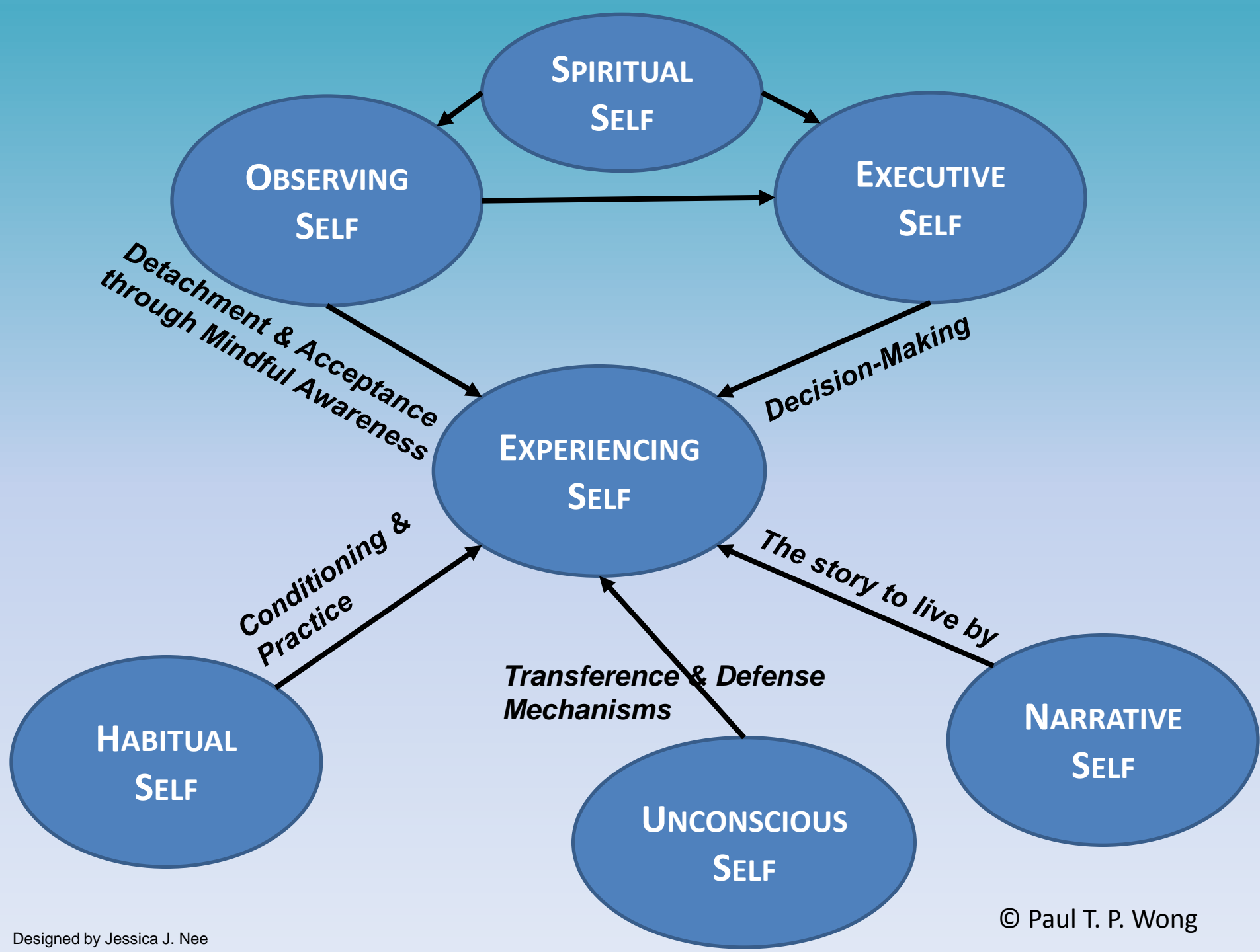
3. IT IS INTEGRATIVE

- MT works with different selves, which represent different dimensions of the complex, evolving meaning system of self-concept
- The different selves also represent different therapeutic modalities
- MT is based on the effective use of multiple selves as depicted in the following figure

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF LIFE

Van Deurzen & Adams
(2011)





IT IS INTEGRATIVE (CONT'D)

- **Experiencing Self** = Phenomenological-existential therapy
- **Habitual Self** = Behavioural therapy
- **Unconscious Self** = Psychoanalysis
- **Narrative Self** = Narrative therapy
- **Executive Self** = CBT
- **Observing Self** = Mindfulness-based therapies
- **Spiritual Self** = Logotherapy & other religion-oriented therapies

The Experiencing Self

- Refers to our moment to moment lived experience
- Refers to Being-in-the-world
- It takes into account the situation and the cultural context
- It also includes one's feelings and thoughts

The Habitual Self

- It includes all the habits of behaviour and thoughts
- It includes all the conditioned responses
- It is maintained by present reinforcement contingencies
- It happens like a reflex without conscious intention

The Unconscious Self

- Such as dreams and transference
- It is also a powerful source of motivation
- Many of our actions and reactions are based on unconscious motivation
- The unconscious self is like the huge part of an iceberg under the water

The Narrative Self

- Refers to the story we live by
- For most people, it is a problem-saturated life story
- Effective therapy results in a preferred life story
- MT focuses on re-storying

The Executive Self

- The rational and intelligent self that makes most of the major decisions in life
- Appraises a situation based on raw data from the experiencing self
- 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 Observing Self

- Observes both inner (thoughts, feelings, & life experiences) and outer worlds as a non-judgmental observer
- Enables us to bypass our biases and barriers to true self-knowledge and self-understanding
- The Observing Self practices mindfulness

The Spiritual Self

- Contains spiritual values and global beliefs about self, the world, & the transcendental realm
- Represents the true self according to the image of God or Buddha nature
- Provides a moral compass for the Executive Self and the Observing Self

Effective Use of Multiple Selves in Meaning Therapy

- Without the Observing Self, our perception of actual experiences can be distorted by our over-identification with the Narrative, Habitual, or Unconscious Selves
- The Observing Self enables us to observe our experiences relatively free from these negative intrusions and connect with the Spiritual Self
- This opens up space for the Executive Self to make the right decisions, in accordance with our spiritual values

4. IT IS CROSS-CULTURAL

- Meaning is both individually and socially constructed
- Meaning systems are inevitably shaped by one's historical and sociocultural background
- We cannot fully understand the meaning of behaviors unless they are viewed from within the ecological context

5. IT IS SPIRITUAL

- The will to meaning (the motivation to pursue self-transcendence) is situated in the spiritual dimension, which is the very core of personality
- Frankl characterizes human existence in terms of spirituality, freedom, and responsibility
- The essence of being fully human is to devote one's life to pursuing self-transcendence

6. IT IS RELATIONAL

- The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation
- Relationship is the key to effective therapy
- In MT, relationship goes beyond mere therapeutic alliance
- MT emphasizes authentic encounter at the deepest level of common humanity between two individuals
- The therapist is the therapy

CONCLUSION

- MT is a very flexible, dynamic, and practical way of doing existential therapy that makes effective use of multiple selves
- MT can be summarize by the motto: “Meaning is all we have, relationship is all we need.”