

# **Terror Management vs. Meaning Management**

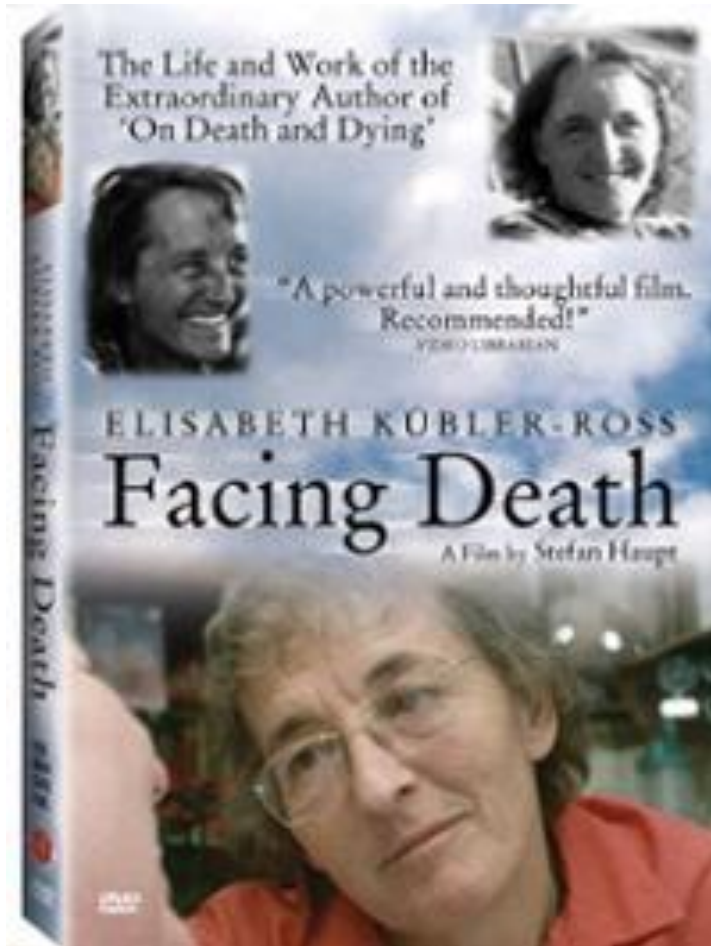
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# Overview

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Stage Theory of Grief
- Ernest Becker's Denial of Death
- Terror Management Theory (TMT)
- Challenges of TMT
- Wong's Meaning-Management Theory (MMT)

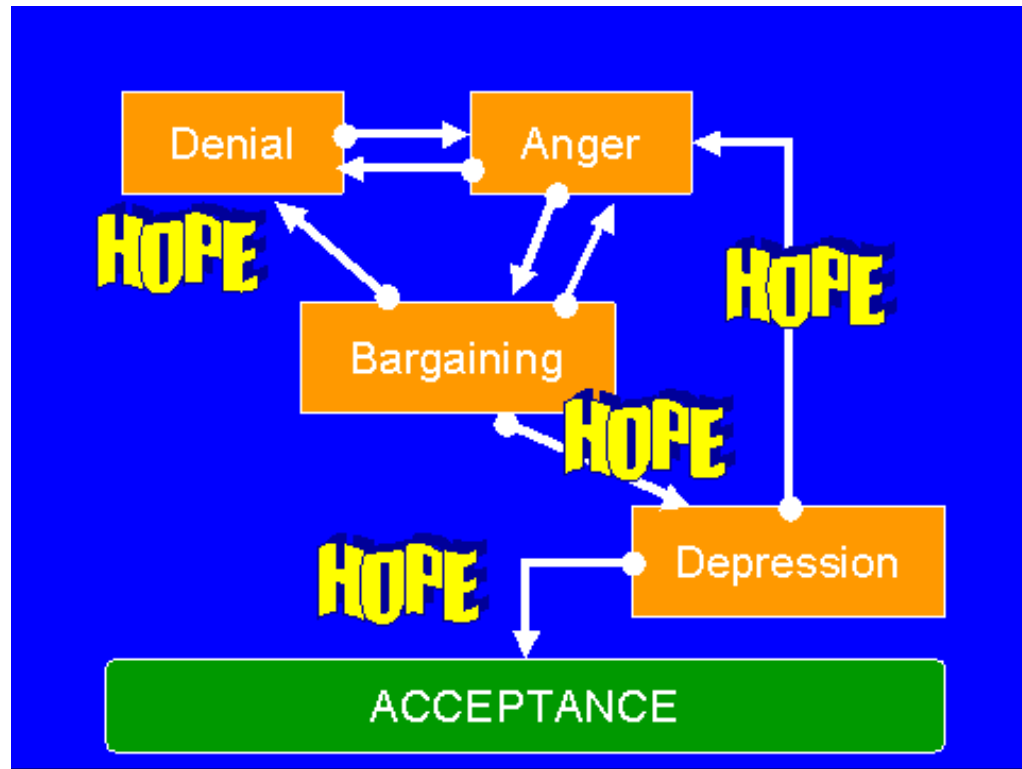
# Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD

(1926-2004)



- A Swiss American psychiatrist
- A pioneer in near-death studies
- The author of the groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying* (1969),
- Developed the theory of the five stages of grief

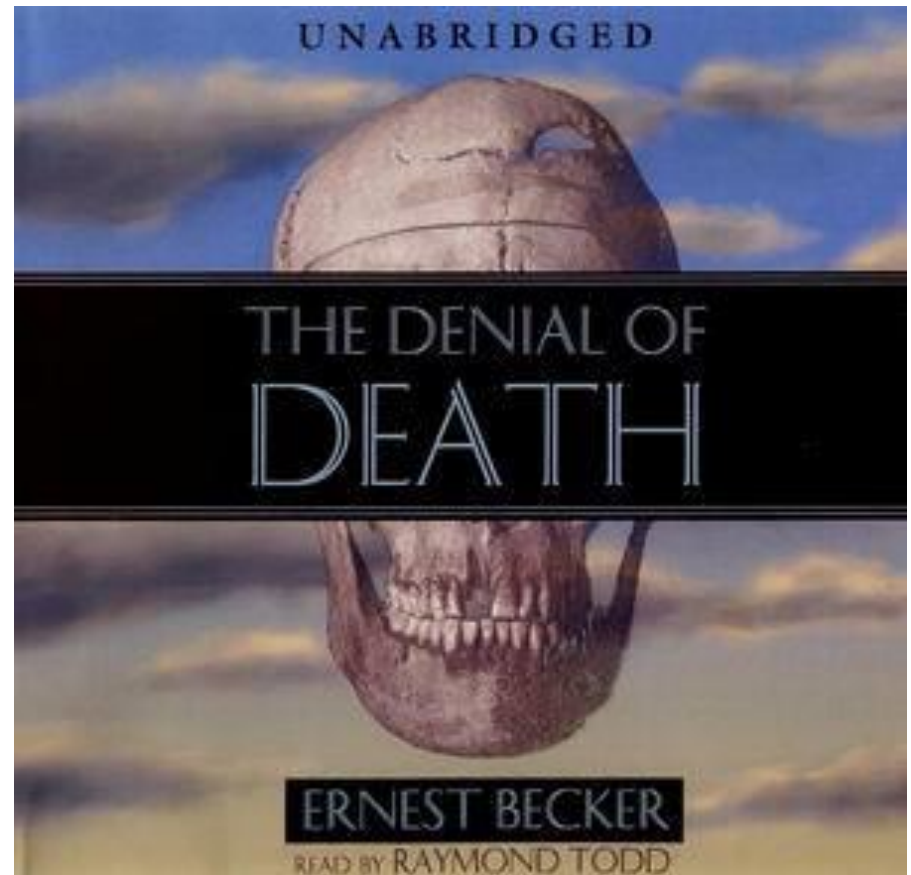
# Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Theory of Stages of Grief



Terror Management focuses on Denial, whereas Meaning Management focuses on Acceptance.

# Ernest Becker: The Denial of Death

Do you think that all human behaviors are motivated by fear and denial of the terror of death as hypothesized by Terror Management Theory?

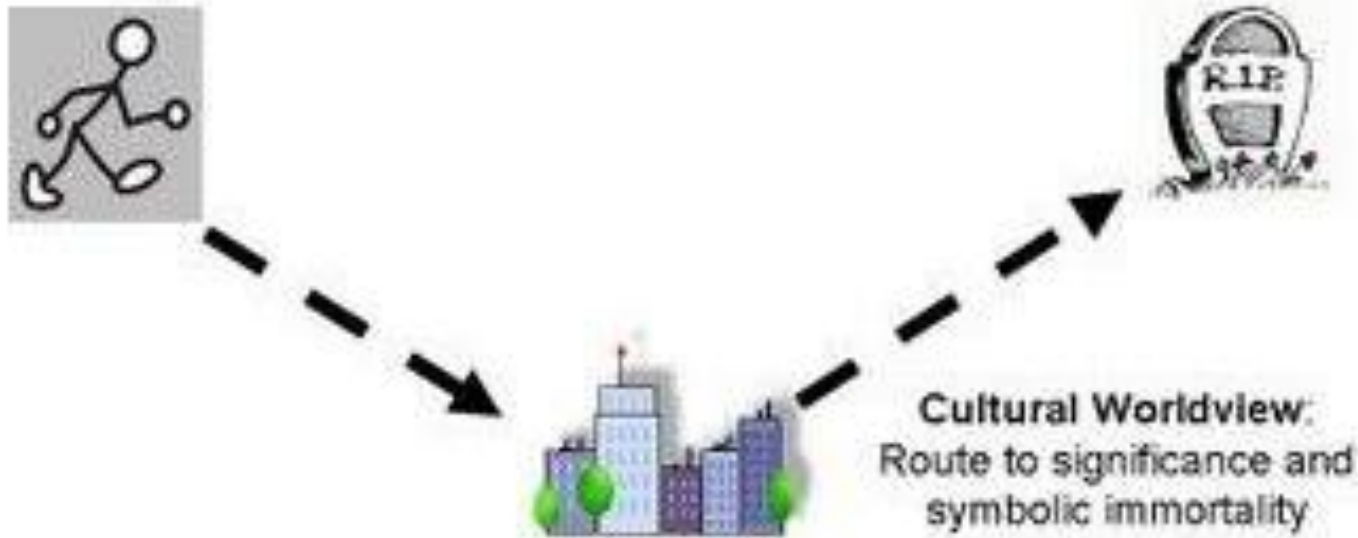


# Terror Management Theory 101



Existential anxiety is an existential given, but terror management theory is based on unconscious defense mechanisms against this anxiety rather than a rational decision to work towards death acceptance.

# Terror Management Theory 101



Terror Management Theory hypothesizes human beings unconsciously defend themselves in two ways: (a) faith in an internalized cultural worldview, and (b) self-esteem, which is attained by living up to the standards of value prescribed by one's worldview.

# Terror Management

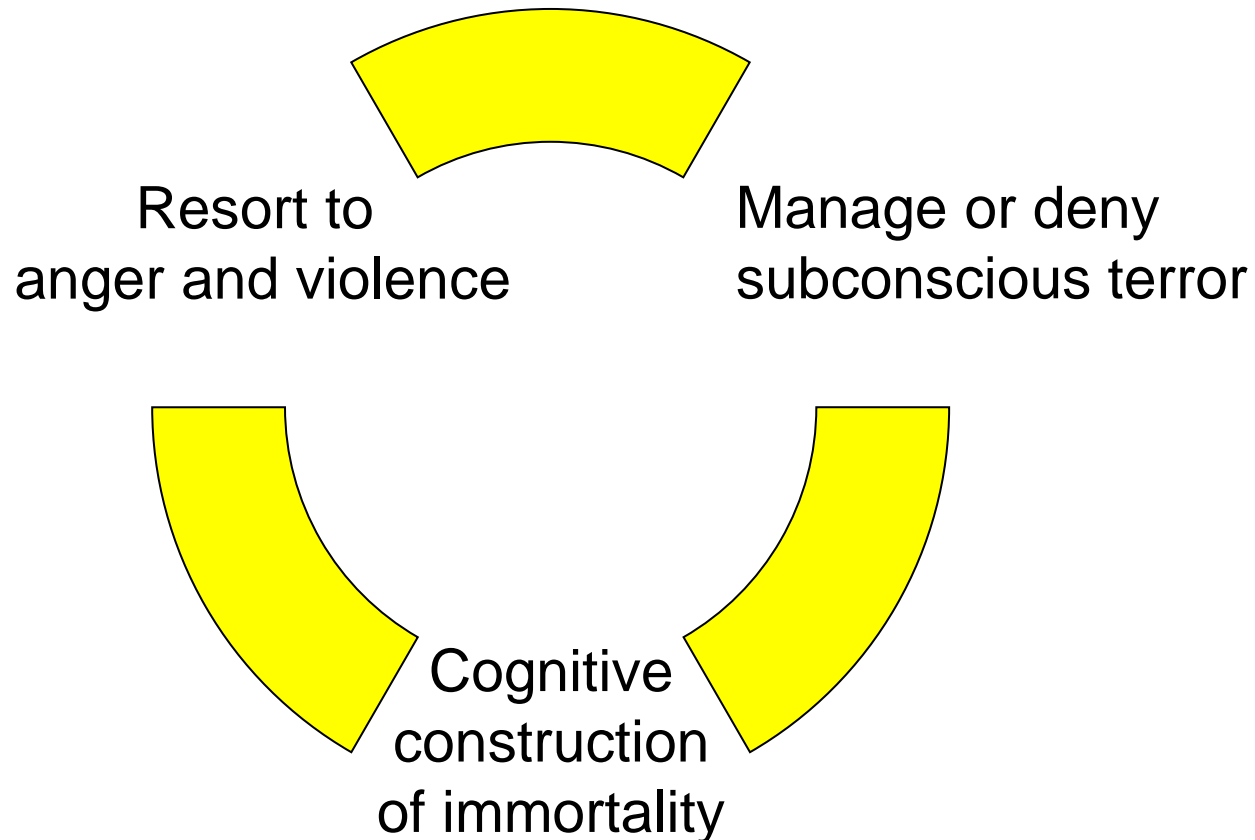
- Unconscious defense mechanisms against the terror of death
- Cultural worldview defense mechanism
- Self-esteem defense mechanism
- No longer adequate in the face of impending death



# **Terror Management (cont.)**

- Need to accept our personal mortality
- Need to connect with the continuity of life
- Need for symbolic immortality

# Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon's (2002) Terror management Theory (TMT)



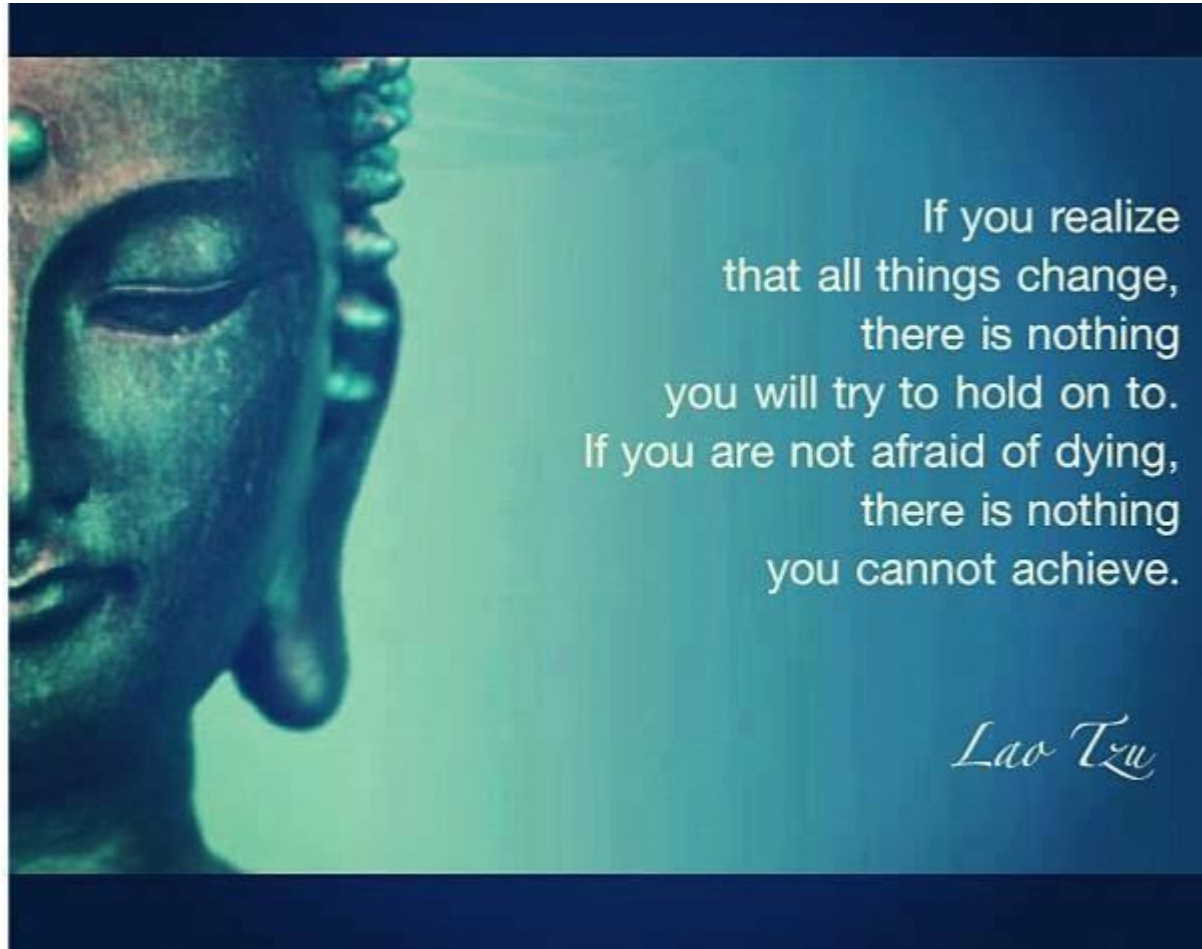
# Questions for TMT

How do you account for the following kind of self-destructive behaviors in terms of terror management theory?

1. self-harm and suicide
2. addiction
3. risky cosmetic surgery
4. gang war
5. extreme sports

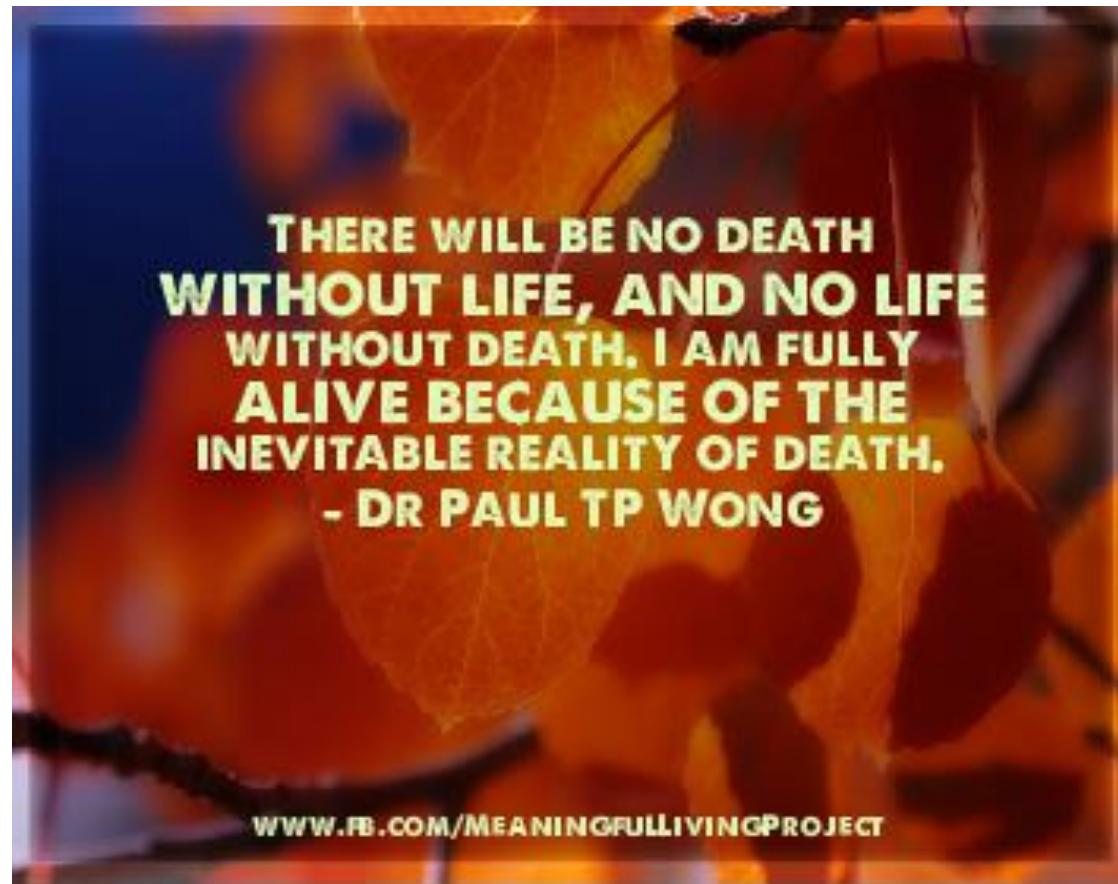
# Competing Theories

1. Taoism & Buddhism
2. Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory
3. Humanistic Psychology
4. Frankl's Logotherapy
5. Wong's Meaning-Management Theory

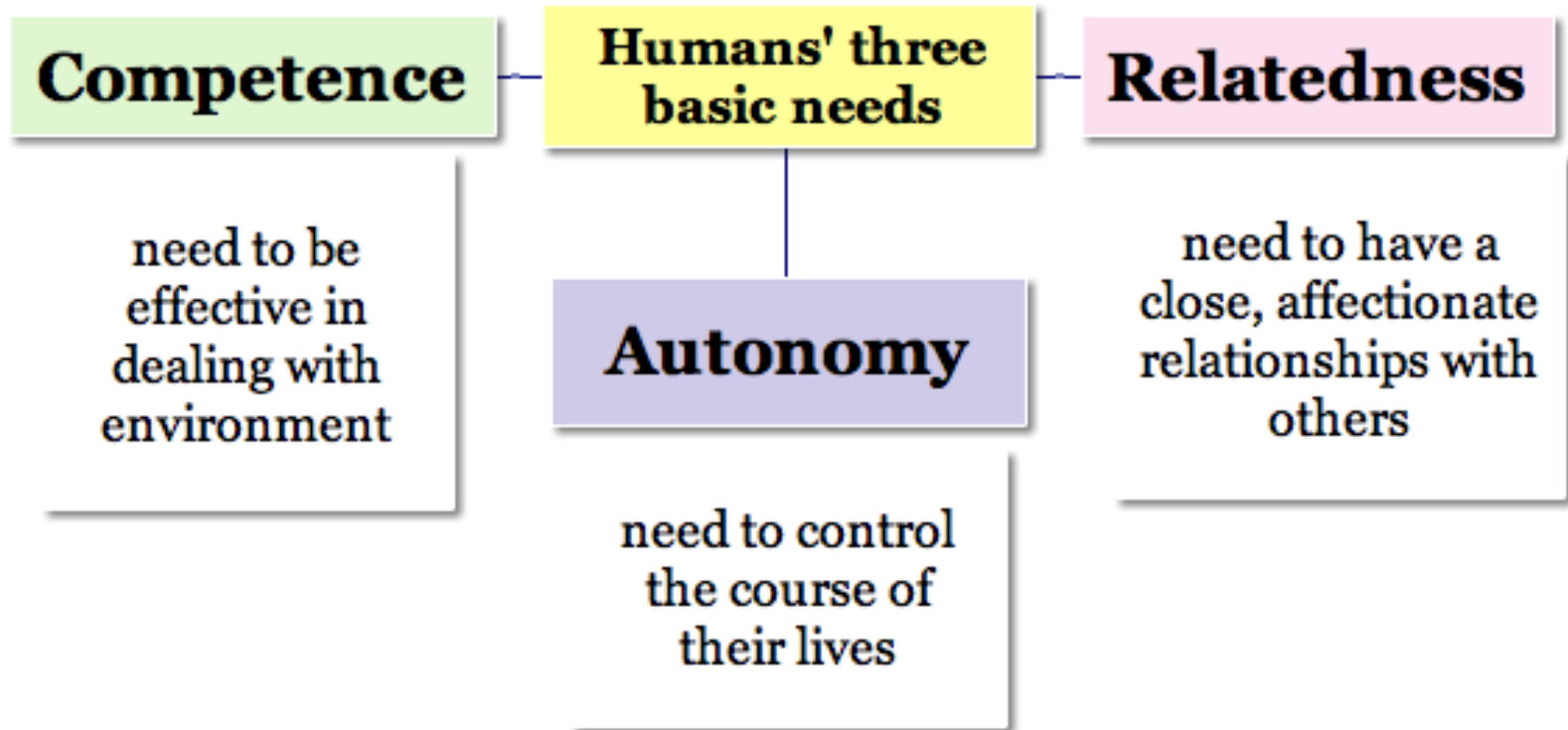


There is a big difference between achievement motivated by fearlessness of death or the terror of death.

Our awareness of the inevitability of personal mortality leads to either terrorizes or energizes one's life, depending on one's attitude towards life and death.



# Self-Determination Theory



Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory provides a growth-oriented positive life attitude in contrast to Terror Management Theory.

# The Basic Tenets of Logotherapy

- **Freedom of will:** Not only freedom from some negative condition but also freedom to something rewarding.
- **Will to meaning:** Striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force.
- **Meaning of life:** One can always discover meaning in life regardless of life's circumstances.



# Freedom & Responsibility

- Logotherapy emphasizes the responsible & meaningful use of freedom.
- Human existence can only be understood in terms of responsibility.
- The will to meaning is based on a sense of responsibility.
- Responsibleness means meeting the demand quality of every situation.

# The Will to Meaning

- It is the primary motivation for living.
- Everyone needs to find the true meaning of one's own life.
- Will to meaning is essential for resilience and well-being to the extent that it means one's capacity to live in spite of pain & suffering (similar to the will to live, “sei no yokubo”, in Meaningful Life Therapy)

# Meaning of Life

- Life has meaning under all circumstances. It is our responsibility to respond to life's demands.
- Each person must discover the meaning potential of each situation.
- The ultimate meaning lies in its pursuit.
- The situational meaning can be experienced through three avenues of value.

# Three Basic Pathways to Meaning

- **Creative value:** giving something to the world through creative works.
- **Experiential value:** receiving something from the world through appreciation and gratitude.
- **Attitudinal value:** taking a heroic stand towards suffering and fate.

# Three Basic Principles

**The Pleasure  
Principle  
(*Freud*)**



**Hedonic Pursuits &  
Addiction**

**The Power  
Principle  
(*Adler*)**



**Deviant Behavior &  
Conflict**

**The Meaning  
Principle  
(*Frankl*)**



**Self-Transcendence  
& Common Good**

# Main Assumptions of Meaning Therapy

- People are meaning-seeking & meaning-making beings designed to learn, work, and grow in a relational world.
- When people's basic needs for meaning, relationship, and engagement are not met, they will develop psychological disorders.
- Therefore, the motto of Meaning Therapy is: Meaning is all we have; Relationship is all we need.

# 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-Management Theory

- **Managing meaning seeking** as a motivation and core value,
- **Managing meaning-making** regarding the content of one's life meaning
- **Managing meaning-reconstruction** as a way of coping (re-appraisal and re-storying).



# **Three Levels of Self-Transcendence**

- 1. Mindful Awareness – Situational Meaning**  
*(Transcends Defense Mechanisms)*
- 2. Setting Life Goals - Mission or Calling**  
*(Transcends Egotistic Desires)*
- 3. Choosing Core Values – Ultimate Meaning**  
*(Transcends Material World)*

# **Level 1: Seeking Situational Meaning**

- To reach beyond our mental and situational constraints and connect with our spiritual values.
- This involves being mindful of the present moment with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and compassion.

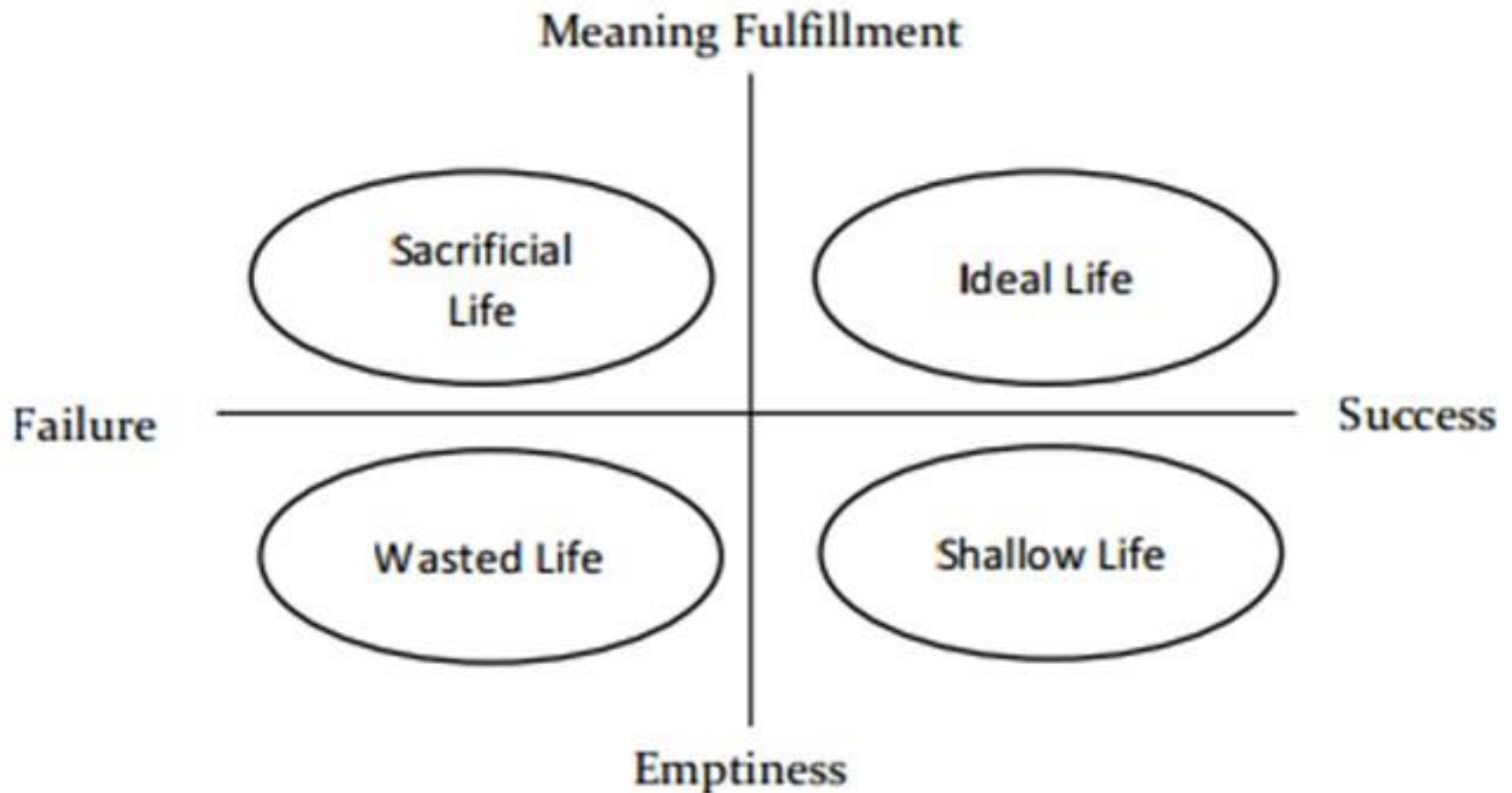
# Level 2: Seeking One's Calling

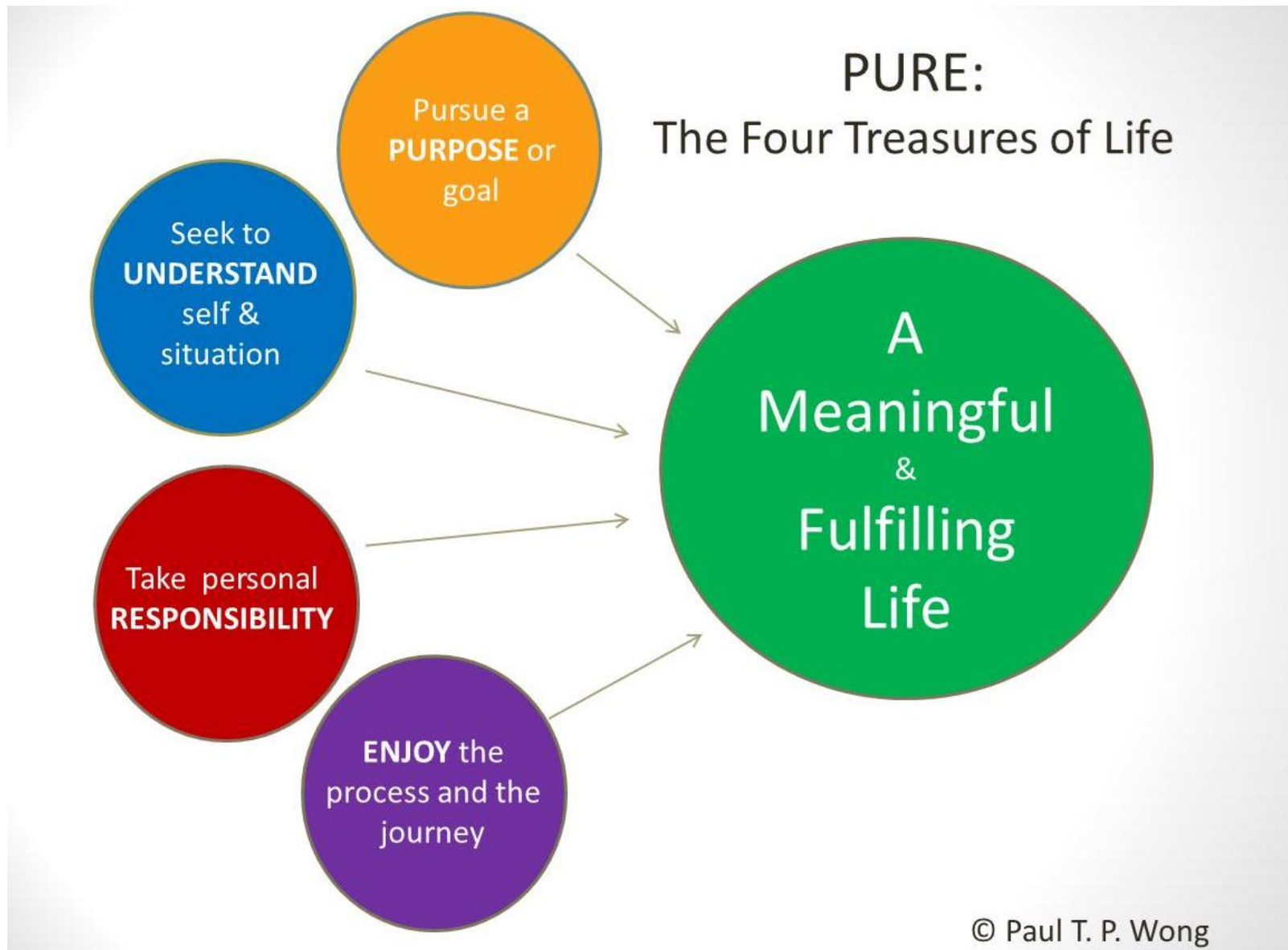
- To reach beyond self-actualization and pursue a higher purpose for the greater good
- It involves engagement and striving to achieve a concrete meaning in life
- It involves a life goal of contributing something of value to others
- It often has a transcendental origin

# Level 3: Seeking Ultimate Meaning

- To reach beyond our physical limitations
- It is beyond our comprehension
- We can only gain a glimpse of the invisible glory of the transcendental realm
- For non-theistic seekers, seeking ultimate meaning means seeking the ultimate ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty

# Meaning Mindset leads to less death fear than Success Mindset.





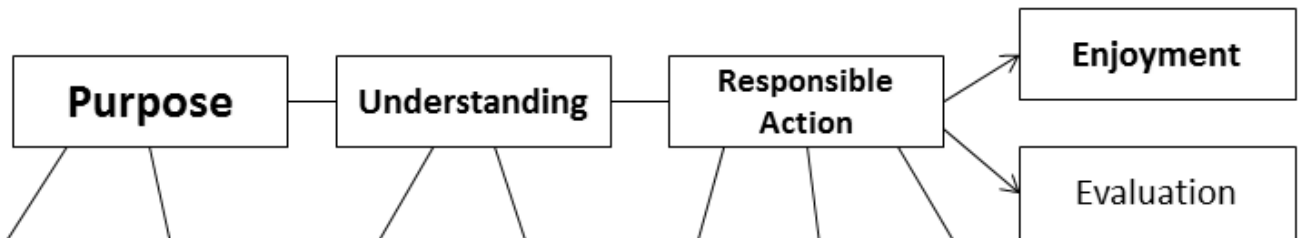
Only a purpose of Self-Transcendence leads to fulfillment & reduction of death fear.

# Meaning needs to be based on enduring values.

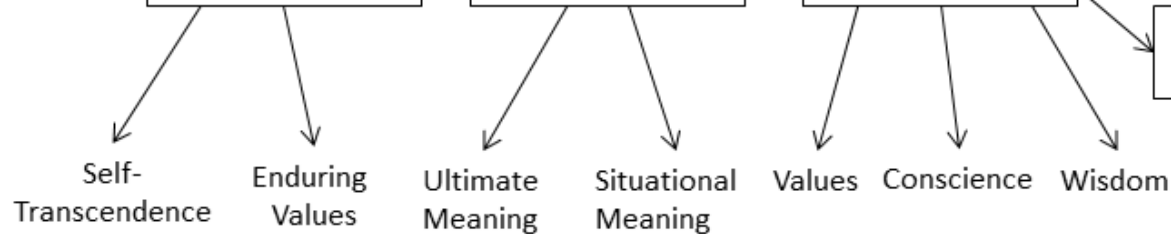
Kashdan & Ciarrochi  
(2013)



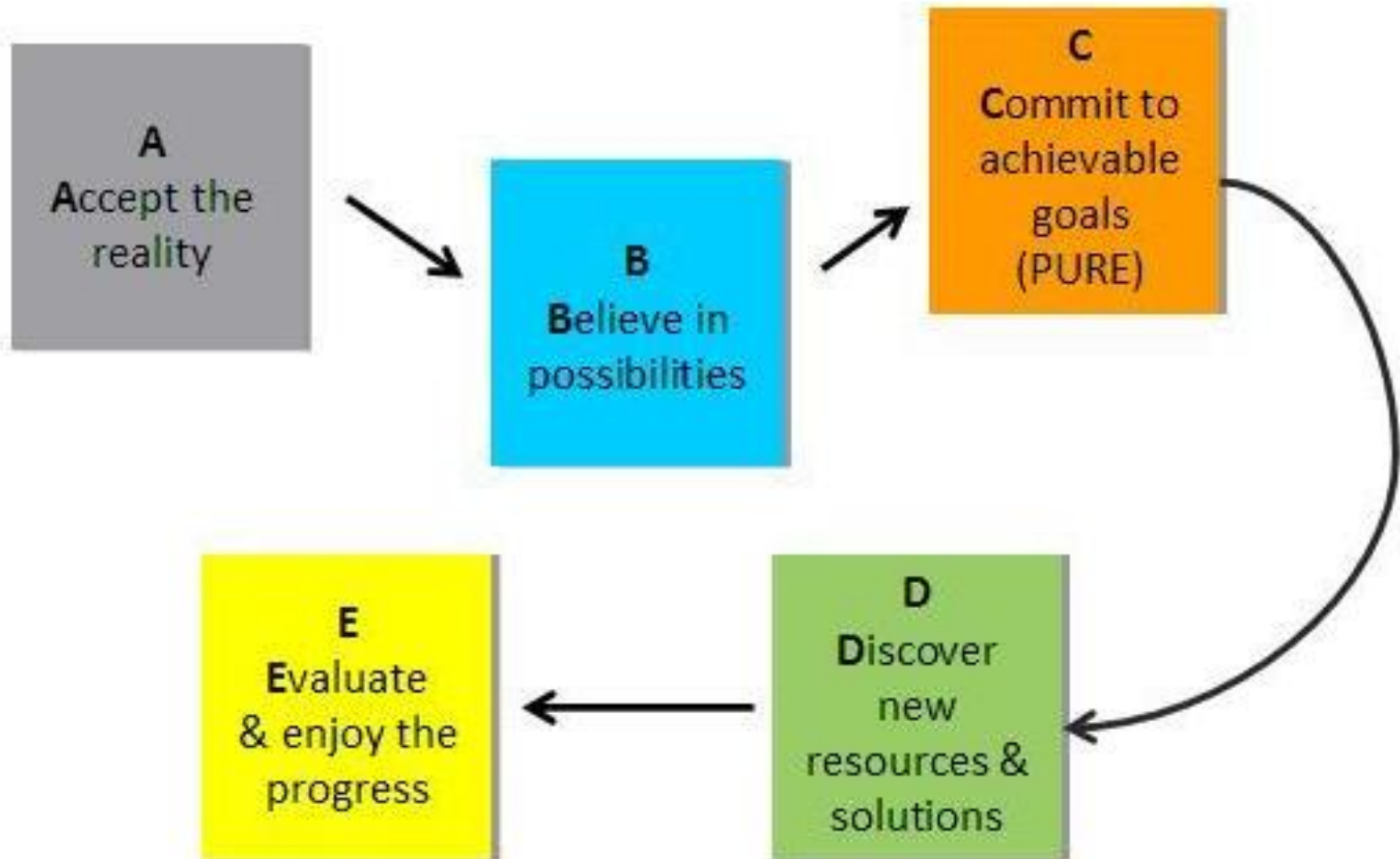
Wong  
(2010)



Frankl  
(1985)



# Managing Adversity through Meaning



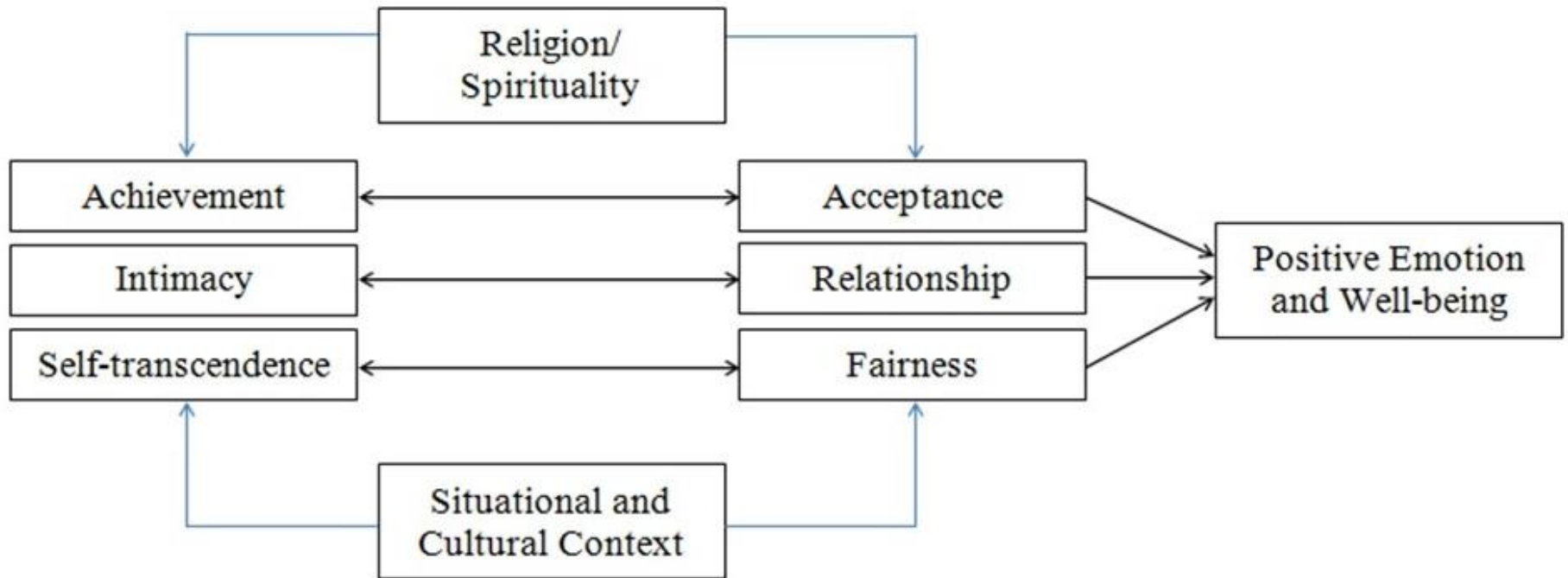


# Managing the Content of One's Life

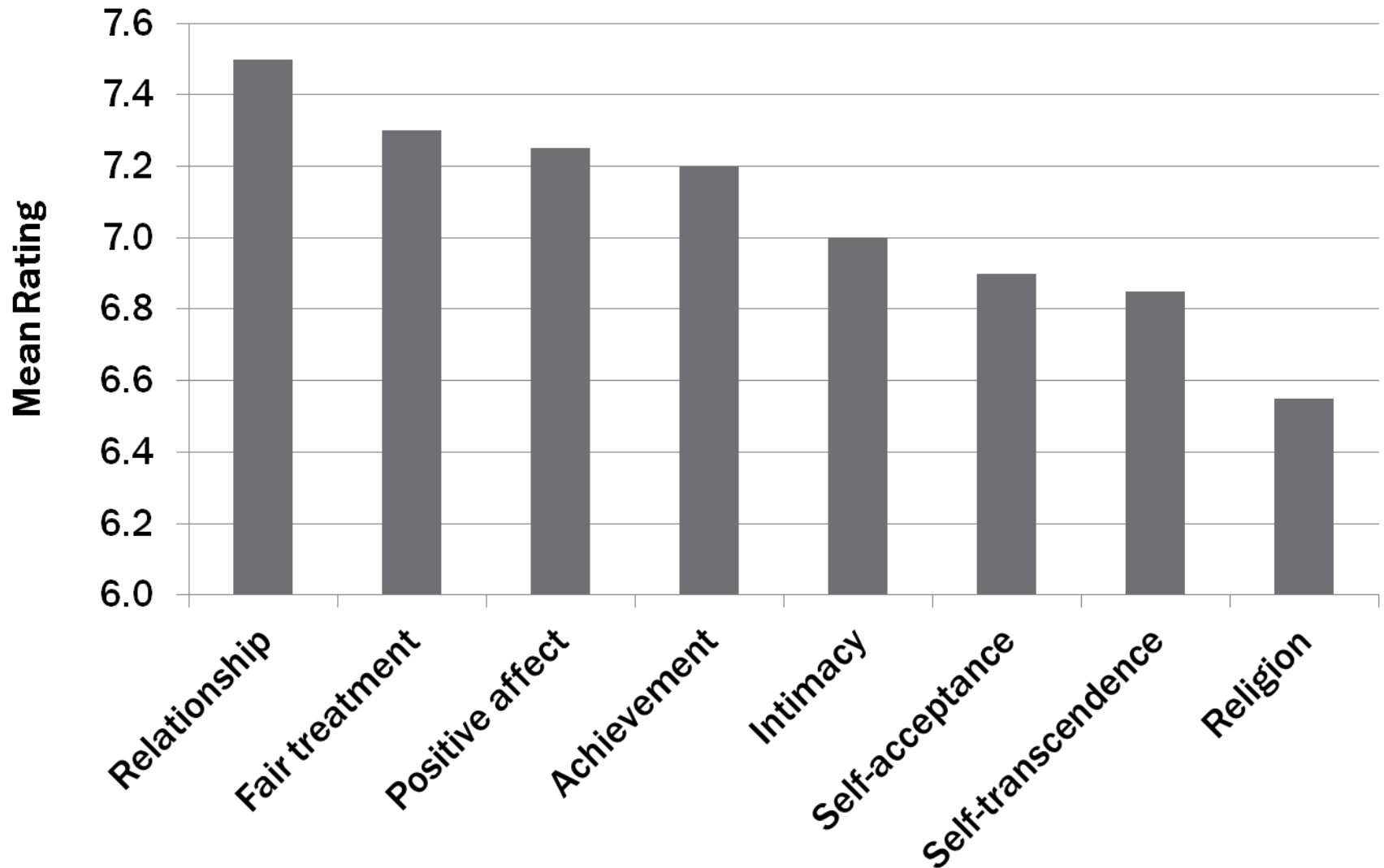
According to Wong (1998), there are 8 sources of meaning and the good life.

- |                  |                      |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Achievement   | 5. Relationship      |
| 2. Acceptance    | 6. Religion          |
| 3. Transcendence | 7. Fairness          |
| 4. Intimacy      | 8. Positive emotions |

# Managing a Balanced Meaningful Life



## Profile of Ideal Personal Meaning



# 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

# Neutral Acceptance

- A rational and scientific approach to accepting death as part of the biological process
- There is no afterlife, but there is symbolic immortality
- Creative & significant contributions make life worth living
- Meaningful relationships reduce death anxiety

# Approach Acceptance

- Belief in God and an afterlife
- Heaven is a better place than this world
- Readiness to let go things of this world
- Recognition of the spiritual connection with a transcendental reality
- Hope in sharing spiritual life with loved ones for all eternity

# Escape Acceptance

- Life is unbearable; death is a better alternative
- Death sets me free from pain & suffering
- Death seems to be the only way out of a terrible mess
- No more quality of life, no meaning for continued existence

# Ten Pathways to Death Acceptance through Meaning Management

1. **Attitudinal** – Maintain a courageous & hopeful stance
2. **Experience** – Receive and appreciate beauty & love
3. **Creative** – Give ourselves to creative work
4. **Generative** – Give ourselves to future generations
5. **Relational** – Maintain connections and repair relationships



# Ten Pathways to Death Acceptance through Meaning Management (cont.)

6. **Narrative** – Construct meaning through stories & narratives
7. **Symbolic** – Enrich life with rituals, images, & poetry
8. **Spiritual** – Practice and internalize religion/spirituality
9. **Nature** – Become attuned to the rhythms of nature
10. **Internal** – Develop an inner sanctuary

# Conclusion

“Meaning-Management Theory is a psychological model that deals with the important issue of specifying mechanisms that may allow individuals to accept death by infusing meaning into their life.”

(Tomer, Eliason, & Wong, 2008, p. 443)