

## Preface



This book was a spontaneous response to the COVID-19 crisis. Various parts of this book just came together organically to meet the mental health needs confronting all of us.

**Firstly, it is based on my social media posting.** I had been posting material on various social media platforms concerning positive mental health in the face of COVID-19 ever since it first broke out in Wuhan, China. Some of the most popular postings are included in this book.

**Secondly, it is based on our need to understand Viktor Frankl.** His name was frequently mentioned during the interviews of various mental health experts, typically psychiatrists. They all acknowledged Frankl as an inspirational figure, but none of them could clearly explain how Frankl’s cure could help us get to the other side of fear and despair.

His current popularity demands a new interpretation of Frankl’s thought for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That is why I want to share with you some of my own understanding of Frankl and logotherapy from many years of research (e.g., Wong, 2002; 2017a).

In my estimate, Dr. Frankl is the most optimistic existentialist. He would react very differently to the coronavirus compared to Albert Camus. Camus believed that the plague meant life—meaningless and absurd. In his story *The Plague* (1947/2020), Camus’ answer to the arbitrariness of death and the absurdity of life was personal revolt: “Rieux becomes the incarnation of the man in revolt. He continues to fight for his fellow human beings no matter how dire the circumstances or elusive the chance of success” (Gloag, 2020, p. 60).

Dr. Rieux’s dedication to his patients was motivated by his moral instinct to save lives against an evil monster in a meaningless and hostile world.

In contrast, Frankl believed that life has intrinsic meaning and our faith in meaning and love can triumph over all evils, including the pandemic.

**Thirdly, it is based on our need for existential positive psychology (PP 2.0).** Rarely was a psychiatrist claimed by both the existentialist and positive psychologists as one of their own as Frankl. He redefined psychotherapy and positive psychology by embracing the contradictions in life. I have devoted two decades integrating Frankl's ideas with positive psychology research (e.g., Wong, 2007, 2016).

The power of Frankl's ideas comes from the tension between suffering and happiness, between self-transcendence and self-actualization. Consequently, the most important tenet of PP 2.0 is that sustainable flourishing can only be achieved on the foundation of overcoming suffering—a bold claim that has already received considerable empirical support, as one can find in the following pages.

Indeed, COVID-19 has made it impossible to ignore the fact that death and suffering is a big part of life. The world has become a laboratory to test out this new science of resilience and wellbeing through the gates of suffering.

My research partners from more than 20 different countries and I are currently conducting a multinational study of how meaning, responsibility, and existential coping can function as a buffer against the adverse effects of COVID-19.

**Fourthly, it is based on the growing acceptance of PP 2.0.** Recently, several MAPP (Master of Applied Positive Psychology) graduates from different countries have interviewed me; they wanted to learn more about the existential positive psychology of suffering and how to apply it to their practice of positive interventions.

Another impetus came from something I posted on the Friends of Positive Psychology listserv on March 21, 2020. I suggested that in the new era of COVID-19, some positive psychologists might want to work with me to develop existentially oriented measures and positive interventions. Then I listed some of the measure I had already developed:

1. Existential Gratitude Scale
2. Life Attitudes Scale (Tragic Optimism)
3. Mature Happiness Scale
4. Responsibility Scale
5. True Grit Scale
6. Search for Meaning Scale

I concluded by emphasizing that “We need to get these instruments and related practices out to help people cope with serious mental health issues”.

I was pleasantly surprised that Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, replied within 5 minutes: “This is a great time for such research, in general, particularly if you have measures before.” This was followed by numerous requests from positive psychology researchers and practitioners. Therefore, I asked my assistant to create a webpage of all the resources I had created for the pandemic.

**Finally, it is based on the need to move beyond the medical model.** I am disappointed that most of the advice from mental health experts focused on negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, and only mentioned medication and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) as treatment options.

A little reflection would tell us that existential suffering inflicted by the absurdity of life cannot be explained away by rational thinking. This is especially true during this pandemic. The Groundhog Day filled with bad news about the rising death toll and harsh economic condition would not go away simply because we can think clearly.

What people really need is the courage and optimism to accept our unhappiness and embrace the absurdity of life as the foundation to co-create a better future for ourselves and for our children.

Therefore, during April of this year, I decided to quickly put together a book titled *Made for resilience and happiness* to help people as part of a meaning-focused therapy (Wong, 1997) to cope with the mental health challenges. My compassionate impulse has over-ruled my concerns for professional pride in rushing out this resource book: I apologize for the rough edges and typos in my writing.

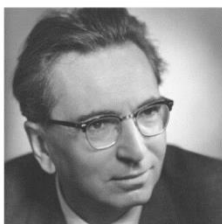
The main thrust of this book is that all human beings were made for resilience and happiness. Our genes and brain are prewired in such a way that we are capable of surviving and thriving through all the pandemics, natural disasters, and wars since time immemorial.

History has shown that belief determines destiny. Once awakened, there is no going back; we will take responsibility to harness the potential within us to transcend the hell of suffering and taste the joy of heaven.

## How do you React to all the Absurdity?

**Why do adults fight each other in supermarkets over toilet paper, when there is no shortage in supply? Why do people still crowd the beaches, running the risk of getting infected or passing on the virus to others?**

I can go on and on. All the absurdities of human behaviors, including our own, can make you mad or make you laugh. If I get angry, I just create more stress for myself without solving the problem. Therefore, I prefer laughter. I prefer to laugh at the stupidity, selfishness, and ignorance of human beings and then feel more relaxed at once. Comedians also use the same themes to make people laugh after all. Viktor Frankl's paradoxical intention works in treating anxiety or obsessive disorders, because it challenges clients to think about the worst-case scenarios of their fears, to the point of realizing just how ridiculous those fears are. Once you learn how to laugh at yourself or at the stressful situation, you distance yourself from the problem and enable yourself to rise above it. There are scientific reasons and findings that humor and laughter are good for you, when your brain experiences too much tension.



"Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds."

*(Viktor E. Frankl)*