

Introduction | How a Healthy Dosage of Self-Transcendence can Overcome COVID-19



Never before have so many people experienced such a high level of stress and anxiety. Frontline health workers and service providers are most at risk of being infected with COVID-19 because of the very nature of their work. It must be emotionally overwhelming for them to face all the dangers and hardships each day.

So many mental health experts have given their advice on how to manage stress and cope with mental illness. But amidst the gloom and doom, I want to advocate the optimistic view that we can win this prolonged battle with COVID-19 on both the medical and psychological fronts. Moreover, all of us can come out this ordeal stronger and better, especially those who fight on the frontline.

All we have to do is to be open to a new way of thinking and the new science of self-transcendental love. Remember the Zen wisdom: Nothing new can be poured into your cup, until you empty it of the old ideas about how to be resilient and happy.



Nothing but self-transcendence can save us! Yes, this is the most promising solution. This may sound absurd to you. But let me shock you further by claiming that self-transcendence is the least understood, least researched, but most important spiritual virtue that can save us not only from the pandemic, but from our inauthentic and self-destructive way of living.

Several years ago, I wrote a paper on self-transcendence as the path to virtue, happiness and meaning (Wong, 2016a). This paper only partially answered the following important questions:

Do you know why is self-transcendence so essential for our wellbeing?

Do you know why self-transcendence can integrate the worst of you and the best of you into a healthy whole?

Do you know why pursuing only the bright side of life without the unpleasant dark side will lead you to be always incomplete, craving for more happiness and success but never find meaning and fulfillment?

Thanks to COVID-19, we are now forced to pause and ponder our way of life and our future. We may ask ourselves such questions as: What changes do I need to make in order to survive this pandemic? What can I do to create a better life when the economy is in shambles? Could it be that I have been too self-selfish, too self-absorbed?

At this crucial juncture of history, the best thing we can do is honestly look deeply into our own soul and confront our limitations, suffering and existential crisis, as eloquently stated by Dr. Young-Eisendrath (1996): “Honest confrontation with the deeper anguish over our ordinary human limitations and imperfections, our inevitable loss, illness, decline and death, wakes us to the significance of our lives.” (p. 9)

I am going to present 4 difficult steps to guide your soul searching. These steps are supported by scientific research and may transform your life:

First we Need to Confront our own Shadow



The first step to take an honest look at ourselves instead of blaming others or blaming society for all our pains and miseries. I know that the hardest thing to do is looking deep into our shadow hidden behind all the masks and defences we have created.

It is true that we all are all living our personal mythology. We are all living by the story we have created for ourselves, unconsciously most of the time. It helps protect us from the horrors of our past and the deep wounds of our soul. It helps give us a false sense of self-esteem and happiness.

The human tragedy is that if we completely accept our personal myth, we only live an unexamined life and we may unwittingly hurt ourselves and our loved one without any awareness.

That is why we need to look into the mirror and examine the innermost part of our soul. We may discover the shocking dark secrets that we have tried so hard to cover up. But we will not change ourselves, unless we have the courage to face the painful truth that we are not what we think we are.

As an affluent and technically advanced society, we have unwittingly become too smart and too smug for our own good. We may feel that we are so sophisticated and cosmopolitan that we have no use for God or traditional values.

We may be so busy pursuing material gains that we have no time to reflect on what really matters in life. We may also be so pre-occupied with only our own needs and self-interests that we no longer know how to love or care for others.

It is a tragic mistake to worship the almighty dollar and the power of science to provide for a good life, because in doing so, we actually pave the way of self-destruction.

Misguided scientism and materialistic egotism lead to all kinds of toxic characteristics such as selfishness, pride, envy, discrimination, hatred, and phoniness, which may be more dangerous than the coronavirus, leading to much unnecessary suffering and destruction.

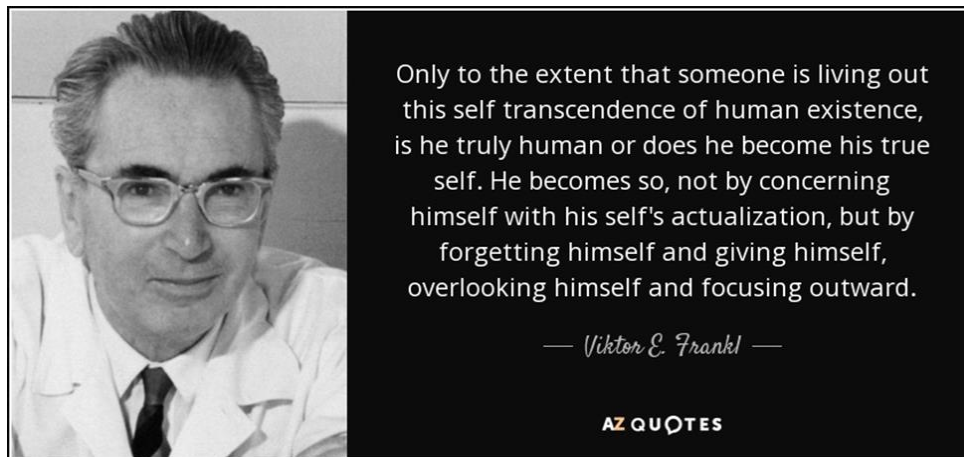
In order to protect their privileges and advance their own agenda, so many successful people use their power to sacrifice countless little people for their benefit; they are able to get away because the poor do not have the power to fight back.

These human evils may be directly or indirectly responsible for the spread of a preventable pandemic and the reason behind most of our problems, such as political unrest, racism, power struggles, marital conflicts, divorce, mass violence, and hate crimes.

We have got into such a terrible mess because we have lost our way, lost our soul, and forgotten how to live as decent and interdependent human beings.

Such awareness awakens us to all kinds of possibilities for positive transformation.

Second, we Need to Change our Mindset About Suffering



The second step is to change our negative attitude towards suffering. We need a quantum shift in our mindset to not think of the suffering caused by COVID-19 as a dreadful enemy, but as a warning that our life is out of balance and a signal that it is time to search for new meaning and purpose.

All kinds of unexpectedly good things can come from this shift in mindset. According to Frankl (1985), we all have the primary need for transcendental meaning; this is the deepest yearning in our soul, which cannot be satisfied with material things or all the good things in life.

That is why he defined our search for meaning as the search for self-transcendence, for something much greater than ourselves, and something worth suffering and dying for. We become truly alive and fearless only when we have discovered our passion for living.

Here lies the pivotal point. Here, Frankl made the greatest discovery in psychology and therapy: It takes suffering to discover resilience and happiness.

For instance, I am grateful for all my suffering, which has made me a better person and a good psychologist who knows how to help others.

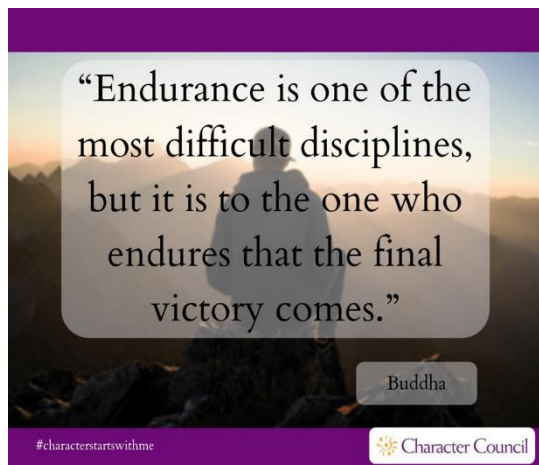
I would not have fully understood Frankl's genius without personally going through the horrors of the Japanese invasion of China, civil war, poverty, and discrimination.

Without suffering, I would not have discovered existential positive psychology (PP 2.0), which advocates that flourishing must have its roots in the soil of suffering.

The good news is that you too can benefit from your suffering—you need to squeeze out all the benefits and good things from your suffering. It would be a crime against yourself to waste your suffering. So stop complaining, and be grateful for all the gifts from suffering—from confusion to purposefulness, from passion to compassion, from understanding to empathy (Young-Eisendrath, 1996).

Therefore, be patient in your suffering until you have learned all the lessons you need in order to find true success and fulfillment in life. You will continue to suffer until you stop resisting. Eventual victory belongs

to those who are able to endure and learn the lesson of self-transcendence.



Third, we Need to Understand the Power of Self-Transcendental Love



“For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth - that Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.”

~ VIKTOR E. FRANKL

azquotes.com

This is a powerful quote. Frankl was able to discover the secret code to resilience and happiness after he suffered in Nazi death camps.

Yes, love is the only way to our salvation. This is no poetic hyperbole, no romantic sentimentalism, and definitely no overused cliché.

It sounds so simple, but it is so profound that it will take time to understand and practice. After many more decades of research, the new science of self-transcendence will reveal the full extent of the power and mechanisms of sacrificial love, which also happens to be the greatest commandments from Jesus (see Matt 22:36-40).

We have only scratched the surface with the recent publication of *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization* (2020) by Scott Barry Kaufman and my own research of self-transcendence (Wong, 2016b, 2016c). We still know very little of the Why and How of self-transcendence, which is the key to resilience and

happiness.

I can only hypothesize that we were wired for self-transcendence. That is why our primary motivation is the deepest yearning for self-transcendent love. That is why sacrificial love allows us to transform ourselves. That is why the passion of Christ on the cross is the most powerful positive movement in history.

But it is sufficient to say that all the research so far have demonstrated that belief in self-transcendence can get people through all their challenging life situations, from aging and cancer, to palliative care (For more details, please read Wong, 2016a; Kaufman, 2020).

Anyone who has been fallen in love would understand that they would be willing to make any sacrifice in order to bring happiness to the beloved.

They would be willing to suffer and endure pain for the beloved – love gives them courage and resilience

They will suffer joyfully if their sacrifice brings the other happiness – love



gives them deep satisfaction in spite of suffering.

They would be willing to help all those who are related to the other – love makes them a caring person

In short, love has transformed them completely, from their innermost being to how they behave and relate to others.

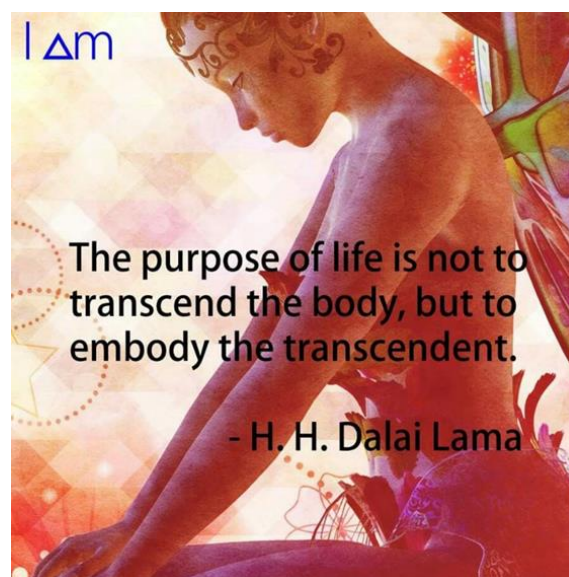
Anyone who has found their true calling or mission would also understand that they would be willing to make any sacrifice in order to realize their dream.

They would be willing to suffer and endure anything for their mission– love for their work gives them courage and resilience

They would suffer joyfully knowing that their sacrifice will be worth it – meaning gives them deep happiness in spite of suffering.

They would be willing to help anyone who is related to the mission – meaning makes them a caring person

The above are just simple examples. Self-transcendence can permeate and transform every aspect of our life. In short, self-transcendence will transform our inner landscape and empower us to use our body as an instrument for a higher purpose beyond ourselves.



Fourth, we Need to Practice Self-Transcendence in Order to Survive and Thrive

Whatever one’s view of life is, suffering has always constituted an important part of human existence. The average person is primarily concerned about bread and butter issues, but in times like this pandemic, we are thrown into uncharted territory where we are confronted daily with existential issues, such as suffering and death.

In a paradoxical way, I have shown that how we resolve our existential crisis can have direct impact on our wellbeing and happiness.

According to Buddhist Proverb: “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.” But what is psychic pain? How can differentiate it from suffering? What are the differences between inevitable and optional suffering? What are the neuro-mechanisms for our happiness in suffering for what we love passionately? How is passionate love related to meaning and virtue? What are the differences between good and bad self-transcendence (Wong, 2017)? That is why I have set up a Research Institute on Suffering and Flourishing, the research arm of INPM

(www.meaning.ca/)

I have also written the book *Made for Resilience and Happiness* (available soon) which provides a road map on how to become stronger and happier by going thorough the turbulent journey of fighting against the pandemic. At times, the waves may seem too gigantic to

overcome, but we have the innate human capacity to achieve something positive in the worst of circumstances through self-transcendence.

For example, you may be reluctant to go to work because of all the risks, difficulties, and hopelessness surrounding the workplace (such as palliative care or long-term care homes). May I suggest that you go through the above four steps by challenging yourself with the following tough questions; this may help transform your life:

- 1) Confront yourself by asking simple questions such as: Am I a coward who is too afraid of risks? Am I a selfish jerk who is not willing to help others? Do I realize how important and valuable my work is? Do I realize that the value or meaning of work does not depend on my position, but on my attitude? Why can't I bring a positive attitude and give it my best when I work?
- 2) Stop complaining about your work and start thinking about what a wonderful experience it is. Yes, it is tough and nerve-wrecking. It is exhausting and frustrating. But also think about what a privilege it is to help others. Don't you realize how many people depend on your work? Don't you feel a sense of significance and dignity to be able to contribute in such a difficult time? Do you feel a sense of pride when so many people are grateful for your heroic work and want to show their appreciation? How many people have the opportunity to be under the spotlight as a hero?
- 3) Do you realize that love is the most powerful force on earth? Do you know that love can give you the strength to endure anything, the courage to face any danger, and the joy to sacrifice for others? Remind yourself that you work because of your passion for your work, and your passion to help others. More importantly, your work provides the financial support for your loved ones.
- 4) Say to yourself that you are no longer afraid of suffering and death because love makes it worthwhile. The idea of being motivated by sacrificial love will fill your heart with joy and ignite the fire in your belly so you may play an important role in combatting the deadly monster. Say to yourself that the worst will be over and your life will be stronger and better because you dared to face the crisis, face your own shadow, and found your way back to self-transcendence, the source of positive energy and divine joy deep in your soul.

Conclusion

“Passion will
move men beyond
themselves,
beyond their
shortcomings,
beyond their
failures.”

—Joseph Campbell

Your solution to the problems of the coronavirus lies in the process, not in the destination. COVID-19 is here, and we cannot run away from it. We must face it, accept it, and move forward with courage and self-transcendental love. The future is on the side of love and hope. We can win the war together, and we can rejoice together by encouraging and cheering each other on.

Self-transcendence provides a way for us to be connected with others and with God; it is through our total dependence on these connections that we discover the beauty and happiness of life.

Self-transcendence is the source of compassion, which means to suffer with others. It is the source of passion, which means to suffer for God and for others. Self-transcendence sets our soul on fire and moves us to accomplish the impossible.

In sum, self-transcendence is a transformative way of making us complete. It is also the most compassionate way to look at life. It is like seeing life through the lens of love from our soul, which softens every blow from life and adds some bright colour to every dark shadow we go through. It makes our life more beautiful and interesting.

A better future begins with self-transcendental love. Hope that you can harness the power of love to transform your life and overcome COVID-19. May you find enough space in your heart to welcome your shadow and embrace your suffering; this is the best way to reclaim your happiness and hope today.

I want to conclude this essay with a beautiful quote from *Anam Cara: Spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world* (1999) by John O’Donohue because it captures the spiritual nature of self-transcendence with such powerful and poetical language:

“For love alone can awaken what is divine within you. In love, you grow and come home to your self...Once the soul awakens, the search begins and you can never go back. From then on, you are inflamed with a special longing that will never again let you linger in the lowlands of complacency and partial fulfillment. The eternal makes you urgent. You are loath to let compromise or the threat of danger hold you back from striving towards the summit of fulfillment. When the spiritual path opens, you can bring an incredible generosity to the world and to the lives of others.”

Self-Transcendence Measure-Brief (STM-B)

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Please respond to the following statements by circling the most appropriate response to the scale, from 0 (not at all characteristic of me or my beliefs) to 4 (a great deal characteristic of me or my beliefs).

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----------|
| 1. | My life is meaningful because I live for something greater than myself. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 2. | My suffering is more bearable when I believe that it is for my family, friends, and/or for a higher purpose. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 3. | I enjoy the process of striving towards excellence in what matters. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 4. | At my funeral, I want to be remembered as a decent human being who cared about others. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 5. | A worthy lifelong pursuit ought to have some intrinsic value—something that is good in its own right. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 6. | What matters most to me in life is the contribution I make to society. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 7. | I focus on discovering the potential meaning in every situation. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 8. | I devote my life to pursuing the ideals of beauty, goodness, and truth. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 9. | I develop my full potential in order to give my best to benefit society. | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| 10. | I am more motivated by doing something meaningful than by the prospect of receiving external rewards. | 0 1 2 3 4 |

For the original Self-Transcendence Measure (STM) (Wong, Ivtzan, Lomas, & Kjell, 2016), please see: Wong, P. T. P. (2016, June). *Self-transcendence as the path to virtue, happiness and meaning*. Paper presented at the research working group meeting for Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life Project, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

For the Self-Transcendence Measure-Revised (STM-R) (Wong, Ivtzan, Lomas, Kjell, & Peacock, 2017), please see: Wong, P. T. P. (2016, December). *From Viktor Frankl's logotherapy to the four defining characteristics of self-transcendence*. Paper presented at the research working group meeting for Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life Project, Columbia, SC.