

Chapter 2 | Viktor Frankl's Cure for COVID-19



Viktor Frankl's (1985) biggest discovery is that the meaning derived from suffering holds the key to resolving that suffering, along with our personal growth. According to Frankl, COVID-19 provides a rare opportunity for healing and new beginnings. The chapter explains why and how it works.

By all accounts, the battle with COVID-19 is not going as well as many have expected, with new cases emerging each day and the death toll still rising (Welna, 2020). According to some views, the worst may be yet to come (e.g., Hunter, 2020; Shpancer, 2020). Therefore, flattening the mental health curve should also be a major challenge (Gruber & Rottenberg, 2020).

As a student of Viktor Frankl and a practitioner of meaning therapy, I believe that we can do better than just return to the pre-pandemic condition, in which one out of five American adults has a mental illness (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2019). As a long-time advocate of grassroots mental health movement, I believe that teaching people how to live a meaningful life is the most economic and effective way to help them develop a psychological vaccine to protect or restore their mental health (Wong, 2015). The positive message of this book is that the lockdown has provided a rare opportunity of awakening or enlightenment for people to become stronger and better through the path of meaning.

Here is a personal example. Recently, many bad things have happened to me. This might be a case of going through a perfect storm. It might be also due to the lockdown, because strange things do happen in people's mind and in relationships, when people are cooped up for a long time without the normal human contact and activities.

Whatever the cause of this series of unfortunate events, I felt compelled to share my predicament on Facebook with this brief posting: "Another night of struggling with God. Since the lockdown, everything has gone wrong, & everyone has abandoned me." This seemed the least I could do during my lonely struggle.

Good things have happened as a result. Firstly, within a few days, over 150 messages of support and encouragement poured in. It turns out that my condition was not an isolated case;

many people resonated with my difficulty. Secondly, I was able to develop deeper relationships with some of them. Finally, I was able to gain deep understanding of Frankl and resolve my problems.

I was not surprised that so many of my Facebook friends recommended Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's bestseller *Man's Search for Meaning* (1985) as a source of inspiration and solution, even though I have read this book several times. As a matter of fact, in the age of COVID-19, the most mentioned psychotherapist in the media and interviews with mental health experts is Frankl.

For example, Kenan Malik (2020) began his opinion piece in *The Guardian* with this quote: "To speak about the meaning and value of life may seem more necessary today than ever", which was from a 1946 lecture by Frankl republished in English recently (1946/2020).

Malik went on to say that at a time of global existential threat, "the significance of Frankl's work lies not in his positivity or optimism but in his insistence that it is humans, and humans alone, who imbue the world with meaning. There is no external authority to whom we can turn to help us decide notions of right and wrong, good and bad. We can rely only on ourselves."

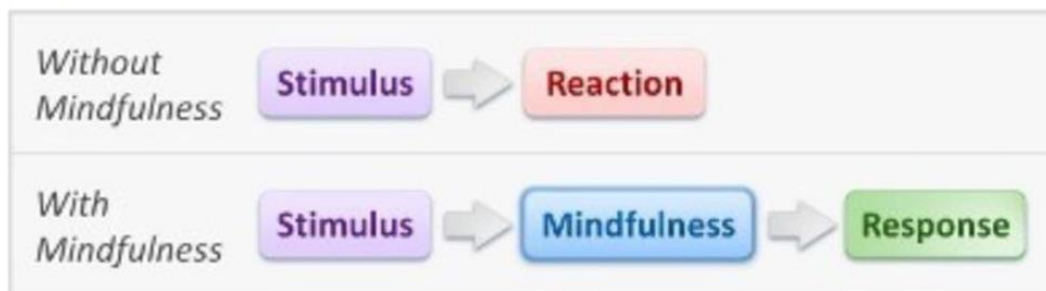
Although media coverage of Viktor Frankl was generally helpful, it did not really explain the How and Why of Frankl's logotherapy and tragic optimism. In this small book, I will provide the road signs for finding meaning according to Frankl.

Returning to my personal struggle mentioned earlier, I need to emphasize that existential struggle is not something that can be resolved once for all, because it is often context specific. But each time we go through the process of searching for meaning, we become more effective in resolving trauma. During this lockdown, my biggest gain was that I was able to develop deeper insights into Frankl's cure and found answers to my problem. I trust that these answers can help you too.

[My First Insight is the Power of Frankl's 3-Second Rule](#)

Based on all my reading of Frankl's writings and the following popular quote typically attributed to Frankl, I believe that this quote can be best understood as a 3-second pause that can save us from many problems. These 3 seconds will create enough space for us to make the right decision, which may mean a different outcome, a different destiny:

“Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” – Viktor E. Frankl



1. **The 1st second.** What is happening in this situation (Mindfulness)? We need to observe what is unfolding with *mindfulness* or *self-detachment* in Frankl's terminology. This brief intentional pause can make all the difference because it enables us to suspend our impulse, bias, or emotional reaction in a split second to allow for more accurate stress appraisal (Peacock & Wong, 1990). Don't panic even when you feel overwhelmed by all the dark forces attacking you. One moment of stillness can save your life and turn the tide in your favor. One moment of pause will give you the necessary time to seek guidance from your soul and/or from higher power for the right response.
2. **The 2nd second.** What are my options or what kind of freedom do I have in this situation (Reflection on freedom)? Whatever the circumstances, we always have some degree of freedom or control; even in the worst case scenario of having a gun pointed at our head to obey an evil order, we still have the freedom of attitude to take a stance. It is always possible to maintain the freedom to protect our inherent human dignity and core value by boldly declaring: “You can destroy my body, but you cannot kill my soul.” We have the freedom to choose to die happily as a martyr, whereby we instantly transform the human tragedy into a heroic triumph.
3. **The 3rd second.** What is the right thing to do? How can I make a decision which is congruent with my life purpose and core value (Frankl, 1988)? We are constantly confronted with the existential dilemma of choosing between expediency and meaning. Choosing to gain some practical advantage, we may have to sacrifice our integrity or sell our soul, but choosing to do the right thing, we may have to face persecution and suffering.

This third question represents Frankl's greatest discovery: The question of meaning of life is not about me or what I can get from life, but about the human family or what life demands of me in terms of moral obligations. Most people from the West may react negatively to the concept of duty, but from the perspective of various Asian cultures, a sense of moral imperative can be a powerful motivation for heroic actions. Frankl's questioning may serve as a wake-up call,

leading to an “aha!” moment of awakening and a quantum shift from “What is in this for me?” to “What can I offer to others”

Sadly, most people are content with living in a two-dimensional space; to them, life is all about eating, drinking and personally being happy. They will only work if they have to make a living. However, some serious reflection on the third question may open our eyes to the vertical spiritual dimension of life, enabling us to live at a deeper level.

The first and second questions of the 3-second rule require the important mechanism of self-detachment, whereas the third question requires self-transcendence (Wong, 2016a).

The 3-second rule serves the same purpose as the Chinese idiom of “Think thrice before you act” (三思而行), except that it is more explicit in providing a clear guide about how to think thrice. The end result is that it reduces the likelihood of making the wrong decision.

Together, these two spiritual mechanisms—mindfulness (self-detachment) and meaning (self-transcendence)—function like a pair of strong wings that can lift you above your stress and personal problems into a new realm of hope and possibilities. Most mental health professionals who mentioned Frankl did not realize that these two mechanisms are the double-helices for our meaningful life just as the double-helix DNA is essential for our biological life.

Together, these two spiritual mechanisms represent a fundamental re-orientation from everyday self-interested obsessions, towards a broader concern for others (e.g., Adler, 1938/2011) or something greater than oneself (e.g., Frankl’s [1985] idea of ultimate meaning). Therefore, meaning may be unique in each individual and in each situation, but the fundamental structure of meaning is the same, always shifting from self-preoccupation to a larger story, even a meta-narrative. Our heart needs to be large enough to embrace others, nature, and the Creator in order to achieve self-transcendence and self-actualization.

These 3 seconds may even buy you enough time to laugh at the absurdity of life and make yourself happy: “Humour...can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds.” (Frankl, 1985, p. 63)

In sum, meaning lies in going beyond the bondage of carnal desires or egotism (e.g., No Self according to Buddhism, or self-crucifixion according to Christianity) so that you may be free to connect with others, with nature, or with transcendental reality and higher values in an authentic and generous way.

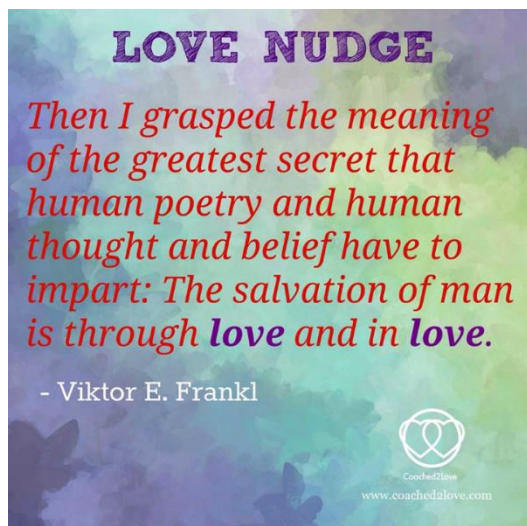
Once you have made the quantum shift to the vertical dimension of human existence—the spiritual dimension—you are in a position to decide how to realize meaning and value in your life regardless of circumstances. To further help you to make the right decision, Frankl has also identified three fundamental values, as discussed below.

My Second Insight is the Comprehensiveness of Frankl’s Three Avenues of Value

It is amazing how Frankl was able to summarize the complex issues regarding the relationship between meaning and values in a simple and comprehensive way. One’s subjective meaning needs to be congruent with the following enduring values in order to be truly beneficial and worthwhile:

Creative value. What you can give to the world through your unique creative work. Whenever you have the freedom and opportunity to do something worthwhile and creative with your time or your life, you would want to do it whole-heartedly, so that it bears your unique imprint of personality, character strengths, experience, and imagination. You can create something of value and leave a footprint that helps others. It does not make any difference whether it is a paid job, volunteer work, or a hobby; it is not the nature of work but the nature of your attitude towards you work that makes it meaningful or significant. Whether your work has enduring value all depends on whether you care for it enough to create some real value. When your work matters to you, it will in turn makes your life matter or significant because of your unique contribution.

Experiential value. How you can receive it from the world through your appreciation. You can savour the moment through your five senses. You can also discover some hidden beauty and goodness in people, nature, or negative events with mindfulness and a meaning mindset (Wong, 2011). The secret to meaning and happiness is that you can always discover something beautiful in life, no matter how harsh life is. You can discover it with an attitude of humility, appreciation, imagination, and faith in the transcendental reality—all involve the activating of your right brain. Suffering can be painful but appreciate the precious life lessons from going through it. The most important part of this value is the appreciation of a love relationship, which is a like a stream in a desert or a ray of sunshine after a dark night. True love always involves the pain of yearning during separation and grieving during death, but it is always a major source of meaning capable of transforming people’s lives for those who accept the sacrifice demanded by love.



Attitudinal value. How you can experience it through the “defiant power of the human spirit”. It can be an attitude of courage or an affirmation of faith to protect your human dignity and core values, even when you were stripped of everything. It is an attitude that enables you to face imminent death with your head held high and your eyes turned towards Heaven. It will give you the mental and emotional toughness to survive COVID-19.

By applying the above insights to my life, I was able to reach a deeper level of acceptance and insight to discover meaning in very difficult circumstances. In fact, there is no bottom in terms of the depth of empathy, forgiveness, understanding, acceptance, and sacrifice.

I was able to restore some measures of inner peace and joy when I was liberated from all attachments—not just from the things of this world, but from the expectations that educated and decent adults should behave according to principles of justice, respect, and responsibility.

Indeed, I had to accept the reality that the life is full of absurdity and darkness, and there are some very bad and unreasonable people.

Ultimately, I was only responsible for my own behavior—I should strive to do the right thing regardless of personal costs. This realization immediately simplifies and clarifies matters. I no longer had to worry about all the complicated ramifications of winning or losing. When I was willing to let go of everything, I was able to find peace with myself, with the world, and feel good about life.

Meaning therapy is actually depth therapy; it is about sinking down deep roots so that we can survive the violent storms of life. To use a war metaphor, when we are bombarded by enemy fire and surrounded by toxic gas or pathogens with nowhere to go, we can always go deeper and deeper until we reach the innermost recess of our soul, the spiritual and healthy core which cannot be corrupted, according to Frankl's logotherapy.

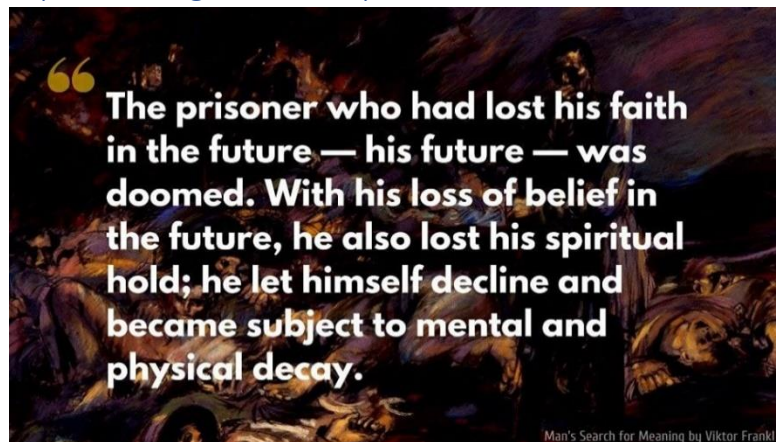
Another way to clarify whether one's desired value is really worthwhile or meaningful is Wong's (2010) PURE test. Not all goals are equal—some are trivial pursuits and some are misguided self-destructive ambitions. To avoid self-deception, one can always apply the following four criteria:

1. **A meaningful life is purposeful.** We all have the desire to be great or significant, we all want our life to matter, to be somebody rather than a nobody. We all want to make a difference in the world. A sense of mattering or significance imbues our lives with meaning. The intrinsic motivation of striving to improve ourselves to achieve a worth goal is a source of meaning. That is why purpose is the cornerstone for a meaningful life. Even if you want to live an ordinary life, you may still want to do the best you can so that you will be known as a good neighbor, a decent human being. But not all purposes are alike. If our life purpose is centered around getting rich and famous by any means, even if it involves stepping on others, then such a life goal is neither responsible nor rationally justifiable.
2. **A meaningful life is understandable or coherent.** We need to know the reasons for our existence, or the reason or objective of our actions and plans (Antonovsky, 1987). Having a cognitive understanding or a sense of coherence is equally important for meaning.
3. **A meaningful life is a responsible one.** We must assume full responsibility for our life or for choosing our life goal. Self-determination is based on the responsible use of our freedom. This involves the volition aspect of personality. The next criteria will explain why responsibility = meaning.
4. **A meaningful life is enjoyable and fulfilling.** It is the deep satisfaction that comes from having made some difference in the world. This is a natural by-product of living a life of self-transcendence. This subjective feeling of eudaimonia only comes from objectively pursuing something beyond and greater than oneself. The self-evaluation that "my life matters" is no longer a self-deception, when one can point to some objective evidence of their positive impact on others and society.

Together, these four criteria constitute the PURE definition of meaning in life. Most meaning researchers support a tripartite definition of meaning in life: Comprehension, purpose, and mattering (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), but these elements are predicated on the assumption that individuals assume the responsibility to choose the narrow path of meaning rather than the broad way of hedonic happiness. In the existential literature, freedom and responsibility are essential values for an authentic and meaningful life (In addition to Frankl, you can also read Rollo May, Irvin D. Yalom, Emmy van Deuzen, etc).

For instance, my life is meaningful because I chose the life goal of reducing suffering, as well as bringing meaning and hope to suffering people. This was not an easy choice, but it was the only choice if I wanted to be true to my nature and my calling. I had to be what I was meant to be.

My Third Insight is the Key to Understand Frankl's Cure



According to Frankl, logotherapy is spiritual therapy. Just as cognitive psychology restored the mind to psychology after behaviourism, Frankl restored the soul and spirituality to mainstream psychology, which was dominated by reductionist and determinist materialism. The soul represents the most sacred spot in everyone's life; it is where we discover our best angels. It is where we encounter the what is sacred and transcendental. Most importantly, it is where we find our passion for life.

The key to understanding the power of Frankl's meaning therapy is to discover the power of FAITH, such as faith in a better future, in the self, in others, and in God. Faith in God is very involved in the exercise of attitudinal value. All hope are based on faith, especially hope in hopeless situations.

What kept Frankl alive through multiple Nazi death camps was precisely his faith in a future reunion with his wife (not knowing that she was already dead), faith in the enthusiastic acceptance of logotherapy in the world, and faith in the inherent value and sanctity of life. He never gave up the belief and hope that allied forces would arrive, and he would still be alive to fulfill his dreams.

Faith, nothing but faith, can counteract the horrors of life and death. All our pursuits of meaningful work and meaningful relationships are initiated by faith and sustained by faith even

when we were living in a hellhole. We need faith to sustain our hope in an uncertain future which is beyond our control.

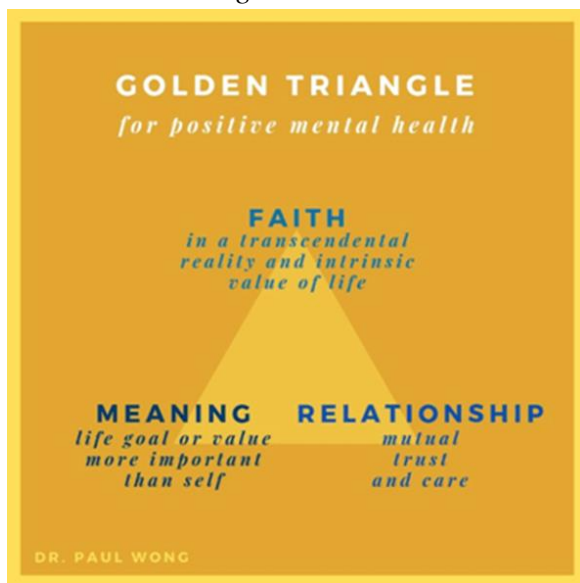
It does not matter whether you have faith in God, Jesus, Buddha, or the spirit of our ancestors, if you have faith in someone or something greater than yourself, you would have a better chance of overcoming seemingly insurmountable problems and defeating more powerful enemies.

In sum, wellbeing can be conceptualized in terms of a golden triangle as illustrated below in figure 1. Each of the three components of this triad is possible because of the of double helix of self-detachment (mindfulness) and self-transcendence (meaning) that liberate us from self-absorption.

Just as social distancing saves lives from the coronavirus, self distancing and self transcendence can provide the necessary life space that saves us from the heart of darkness, characterized by greed, pride, ignorance, and egotistic pursuits. The psychological imperative of cultivating faith, meaning, and love can be found throughout this book, because these three elements are like air, food, and water which are essential to our physical health. Later, I will show that the Golden Triangle and the Iron Triangle (see figure 2, which I will describe later) together constitute Frankl's vaccine against suffering and the recipe to success.

Figure 1

The Golden Triangle



Frankl is also relevant in the current debate of saving lives vs. saving the economy. On the one hand, he believes in the intrinsic value of life because of its spiritual origin, its singularity for each individual, and its potential for growth and to create some value for humanity. On the other hand, he believes that life is meaningful to the extent that we need to find something greater than ourselves and worth dying for. In other word, he believes in the

paradoxical truth of life: Life has meaning and value only when it become what it was meant to be, which is pursuing a self-transcending life goal.

In Frankl's view, life is priceless. One cannot put a price tag on anyone's life because we were all created equal in the image of God and endowed with greater value than any material things. That's why he encourages people to say Yes to life, no matter what.

A related argument in favor of life is that a living individual is always able to create some value or wealth, whereas a dead individual will be a terrible loss to their loved ones emotionally and entails economic loss. Therefore, whether from the perspective of cost/benefit analysis or from the framework of humanistic values, saving lives should be given a higher priority over saving the economy. In short, life always trumps money.

Now, close your eyes and ask yourself the following self-reflection questions:

- 1) What do I want to do with my one and only life?
- 2) What is worth all my effort and sacrifices?
- 3) What is life, if there is no dream, no suffering, no overcoming, and no hope?

Reflecting on these three questions may set you free from your shallow meaningless existence and get you started on a risky but exciting adventure. You may find some road signs and helpful tools in the following pages.

The second exercise is to meditate on the following three self-affirmations:

- 1) I believe that life has meaning till I breaths my last my last.
- 2) I am grateful that the reality of suffering and death shows me what I was meant to be.
- 3) I am confident that I can find my way to a happy and meaningful life even in a hostile environment.

The third exercise is to complete the Personal Meaning Profile-Revised and discover your sources of meaning-in-life:

Please indicate the score you circled for the indicated question number in the cells below.

Add up the scores in each row:

Personal Meaningful Profile-Brief (PMP-B)

© Paul T. P. Wong, 2012

This questionnaire is intended to identify what really matters in your life and measures people's perception of personal meaning in their lives. Generally, a meaningful life involves a sense of purpose and personal significance. However, people often differ in what they value most, and they have different ideas as to what would make life worth living. The following statements describe potential sources of a meaningful life. Please read each statement carefully and indicate to what extent each item characterizes your own life. You may respond by circling the appropriate number according to the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at All			Moderately			A Great Deal

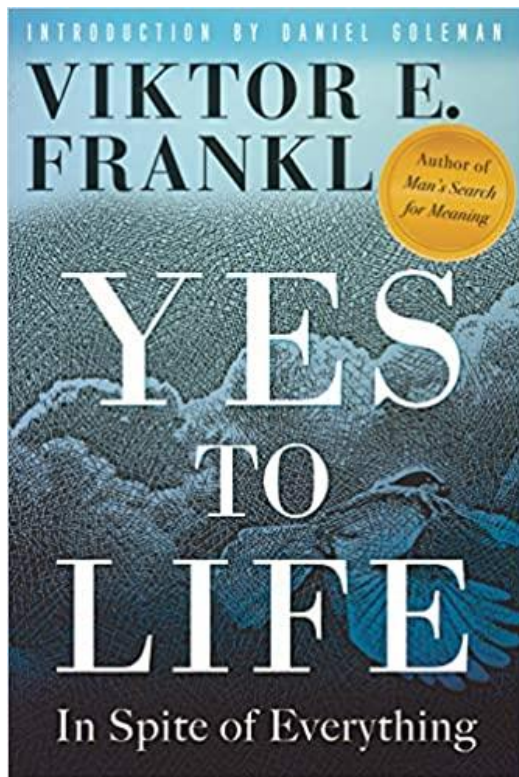
For example, if going to parties does not contribute to your sense of personal meaning, you may circle 1 or 2. If taking part in volunteer work contributes quite a bit to the meaning in your life, you may circle 6 or 7.

It is important that you answer honestly on the basis of your own experience and beliefs.

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I believe I can make a difference in the world | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I have someone to share intimate feelings with | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I strive to make this world a better place | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. I seek to do God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I like challenge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. I take initiative | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. I have a number of good friends | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. I am trusted by others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. I seek to glorify God | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. Life has treated me fairly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. I accept my limitations | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. I have a mutually satisfying loving relationship | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 13. I am liked by others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 14. I have found someone I love deeply | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 15. I accept what cannot be changed | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 16. I am persistent and resourceful in attaining my goals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 17. I make a significant contribution to society | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 18. I believe that one can have a personal relationship with God | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 19. I am treated fairly by others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 20. I have received my fair share of opportunities and rewards | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 21. I have learned to live with suffering and make the best of it | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Reference: McDonald, M. J., Wong, P. T. P., & Gingras, D. T. (2012). [Meaning-in-life measures and development of a brief version of the Personal Meaning Profile](#). In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications* (2nd ed., pp. 357-382). New York, NY: Routledge.

For the scoring key, please refer to the "Measures and Scales Scoring Keys" section.



It is only fitting to conclude this brief introduction to logotherapy by quoting Frankl (1946/2020) regarding the inherent, unconditional value and meaning of individual life:

“What remained was the individual person, the human being — and nothing else. Everything had fallen away from him during those years: money, power, fame; nothing was certain for him anymore: not life, not health, not happiness; all had been called into question for him: vanity, ambition, relationships. Everything was reduced to bare existence. Burnt through with pain, everything that was not essential was melted down — the human being reduced to what he was in the last analysis: either a member of the masses, therefore no one real, so really no one — the anonymous one, a nameless thing (!), that ‘he’ had now become, just a prisoner number; or else he melted right down to his essential self.”