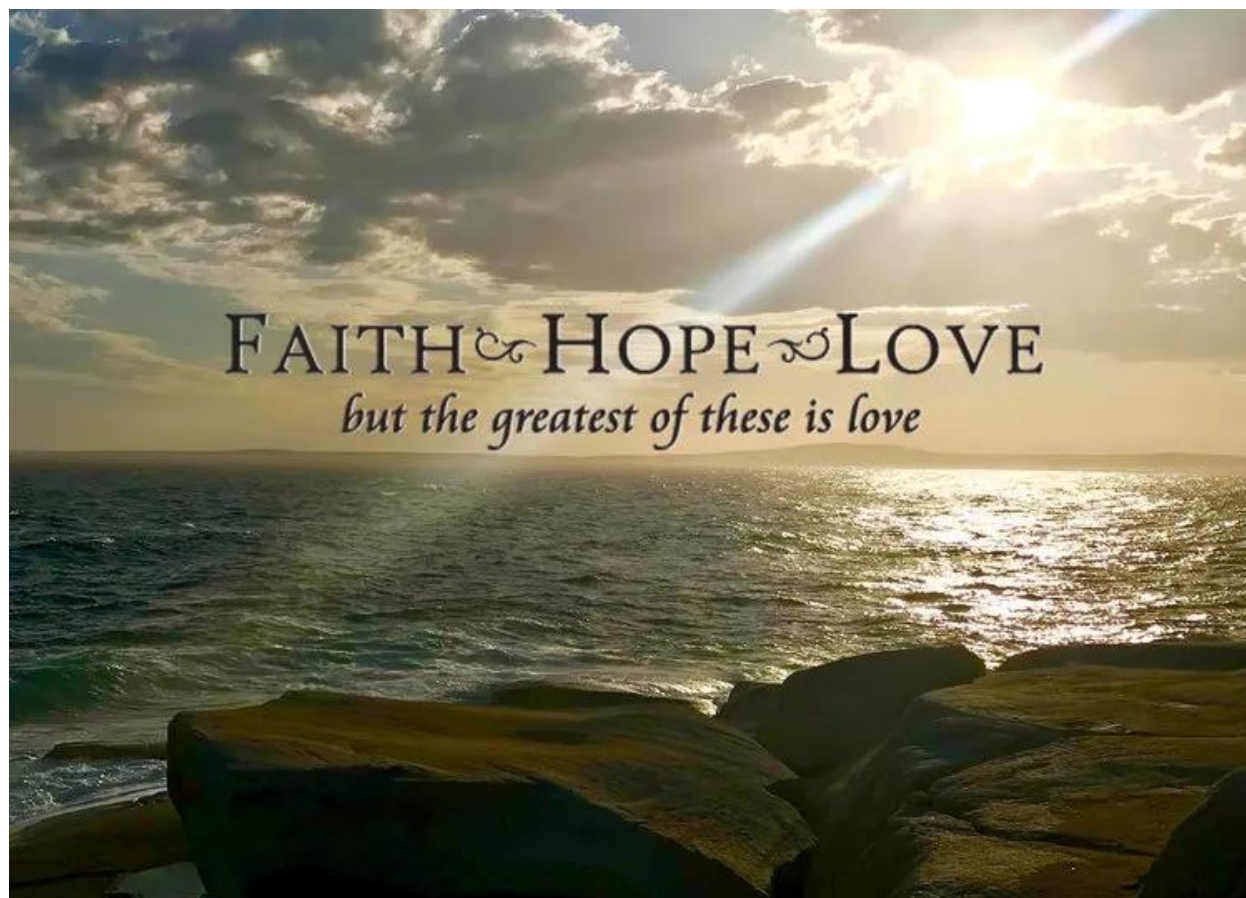


## The Faith-Hope-Love Model of Mental Health & Total Wellbeing

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a paradigm shift as a better alternative to solving the present global mental health crisis. This new model moves beyond the medical model and reframes mental health in terms of how to live well or how to enjoy a high level of existential wellbeing through overcoming suffering and meeting one's basic spiritual needs for meaning, love and faith. This new model can also be described as the pain-brain-culture way of healing and flourishing because the processes involved in solving the problem of pain and existential suffering encompasses making full use of our brain, life experiences, and the cultural ideals of faith, hope and love. More specifically, this Faith-Hope-Love model can be summarized as the ABC principles of achieving *spiritual-existential wellbeing* (SEW) through (a) awareness of our need for change, (b) belief in achieving a better future with divine providence, and (c) commitment to making daily steps of improvement in striving towards a meaningful life goal.

*Keywords:* faith, hope, love, existential wellbeing, life intelligence, divine providence, positive psychology, spirituality, religion, existential positive psychology

## **Spiritual-Existential Wellbeing (SEW):**

### **The Faith-Hope-Love Model of Mental Health & Total Wellbeing**

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“The brightest aspects of human experiences arise from the darkest possibilities.”

—C. A. Soper (2020)

### **Introduction**

“How do you feel?”, my friends would ask me with some concern, as if someone with cancer would feel differently from those without cancer.

Yes, cancer patients do feel differently. I remember that one of my research assistants, about four decades ago, died of breast cancer in her late 20s (she came to my mind because recently I accidentally met her daughter who was only three when she lost her mom). That research assistant told me that cancer patients live in a different world, far removed from the land of the living.

Yes, I do feel differently, but not in the way that my friends think. Much to their surprise, my answer is: “I have never felt any better deep down because I finally understand what Apostle Paul meant when he said, ‘to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Philippians 1:21).”

Old age or terminal illness can set one free to do what matters most without worrying about failure or what others might think. There is no better way for the final exit than doing what one loves most. The objective of this paper is to articulate the inner peace and joy found amidst suffering, and more importantly, how inner calm can be achieved.

The following statements may help capture the essence of *existential wellbeing* (EW), which sets it apart from other types of wellbeing such as psychological or physical wellbeing.

Take a couple of minutes to reflect on these statements and decide which ones characterize you at the present; if you can endorse at least 5 statements, you are doing quite well:

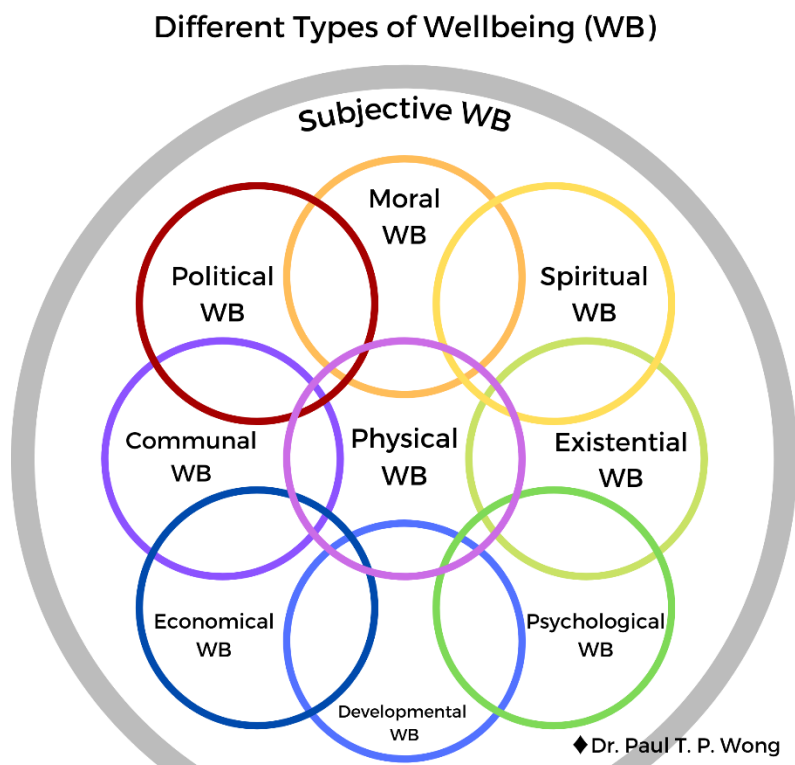
1. I am at peace with myself, with others, and with God (Logos or Tao).
2. Many have betrayed me, but I have found enough love in my heart to forgive them.
3. I am grateful that all my misfortunes are the fertile ground for personal growth.
4. The world is full of evil and suffering but also full of goodness and beauty.
5. I have the courage to confront and transcend whatever life throws at me.
6. Whatever will be will be, and it is well with my soul.
7. When I am at the end of my rope, I still have hope in God and divine providence.
8. No matter how hard life is, I maintain a deep sense of meaning and purpose.
9. Life is the most precious gift; that is why I value my time on earth.
10. I feel deep joy when I forget about my own troubles and focus on caring for others

An astute reader can readily see that my sense of existential wellbeing comes from my faith in God and from the spiritual power of faith, hope and love. With all my research on character strengths, I do not know any virtues or values more adaptive and powerful than these spiritual values of transcending suffering and death (Christman & Mueller, 2017; Selvam, 2010).

Some refer to the Faith-Hope-Love model as ‘spiritual wellness’ (Christman & Mueller, 2017). I prefer the term *spiritual-existential wellbeing* (SEW) because the theme of spirituality is closely woven with existential concerns (Thompson, 2007). What makes SEW unique is that unlike other kinds of wellbeing (Figure 1), SEW can be positively associated with suffering when it is embraced and transformed. In other words, SEW is positively correlated with flourishing through suffering.

## Figure 1

*Varieties of Wellbeing (from Wong, Arslan et al., 2021)*



From a holistic and multi-systems perspective (Lee et al., 2021; Lomas et al., 2021; Wong, Arslan et al., 2021), there are at least 9 types of wellbeing. SEW involves a combination of spiritual, existential, and psychological wellbeing in the context of the inescapable suffering.

### **What is Spiritual-Existential Wellbeing (SEW)?**

Those who are scientifically minded may press for a working definition of SEW. The best example of SEW is Frankl's demonstration that those who maintained a sense of meaning and purpose greater than oneself could survive the horrors of Nazi death camps (Frankl, 1946/1985; Ryff, 2012).

Historically, SEW is rooted in the work of existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. Existentialism is concerned with the big questions of human

struggles such as “Who am I?” “What am I doing here?” “What is the point of striving when death is the inevitable end?” and “How can one find happiness in a world full of suffering?” An existential perspective illuminates the depths of human experiences and explores the possibilities of living fully in difficult times (Wong, 2017, 2021a).

Some may dismiss the concept of SEW as unrealistic armchair philosophy, but during the pandemic, most of my clients wrestled with existential issues and wondered whether it is even possible to find some happiness in a harsh and dangerous world.

For example, I had a client whose face was distorted by pain, and whose eyes were two dark holes of sadness and despair when he first came to my office. As a Ukrainian refugee struggling to start a new life, he worried about his family members back home and suffered from the trauma of a toxic workplace. He was a “bundle of nerves”: highly vigilant about everything to the point of paranoia. To him, the world is a very dangerous place. After experiencing so many failures and betrayals, he had lost all hope and all confidence in himself and in other people. I invited him to look up [drpaulwong.com/autobiography](http://drpaulwong.com/autobiography) to demonstrate that SEW is achievable in similar circumstances.

My litany of misfortunes includes: a war baby at birth, growing up under Japanese occupation, becoming a refugee to escape China’s civil war, starting a new life in Canada with nothing to my name, achieving some measure of professional success in spite of swimming against the tide and racial discrimination, and escaping death three times from various diseases. In addition to coping with the most aggressive type of prostate cancer, I also have to live with pain 24/7 as an 85-year-old man – from the pain of eating with my dentures to sleeping with muscle pain. However, with faith, hope and love, old age and illness can also set one free to do

what matters most without worrying about ridicule and failure. There is no better way to exit this world than doing what one loves most.

Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 12:10) proclaimed this paradoxical truth: “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Likewise, I only boast of my suffering and experience the kind of SEW as described in the beginning of this paper.

The twenty-first century witnesses numerous existential crises, such as the pandemic (Wong, Mayer et al., 2021a), climate change (Wong-Shing, 2022), and increase in chronic illnesses due to longevity (Brown, 2015). But all these crises also offer opportunities for deep reflection and enlightened self awareness of one’s need for positive change. That is probably why my research on existential positive psychology (EPP) has begun to attract more attention during COVID-19 (Wong, Mayer et al., 2021a; Wong, Cowden et al., 2022).

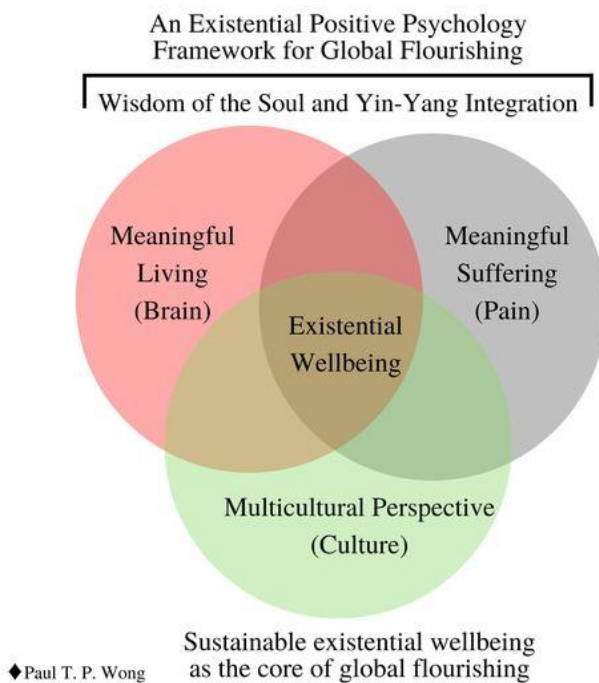
In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Rashid and Brooks (2022) points out the same truth: “We often follow a misguided formula for happiness—pushing us toward material wealth and other worldly successes. But when our expectations set us down the wrong path, it may be time to reorient ourselves around something new: universal happiness principles we can practice at any age.”

It is indeed high time to seek the universal principles for happiness that are applicable at any age, even in difficult times, as advocated by EPP (Wong, 2021a). In simplest terms, EPP is the scientific study of existential universals: how to see the light in the darkness, how to transform suffering into personal growth, and how to experience inner peace and joy through meaningful living, meaningful suffering, and living with others in peace in spite of cultural differences (Wong, in press-a, in press-b).

Given the above background, my working definition for SEW is *the total wellbeing or quality of life characterized by inner peace, joy, and harmony, resulting from both overcoming the dark side of life and meeting one's basic spiritual needs for faith, hope and love, through the dialectics of Yin Yang or approach-and-avoidance systems* (Wong, 2012), as depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*An Existential Positive Psychology Framework for Global Flourishing*



### **How to Achieve SEW: The Pain-Brain-Culture Way**

The main thrust of this paper is to introduce the practical steps necessary to achieve high SEW. As an extension of Viktor Frankl's (1946/1985) logotherapy, C. A. Soper's (2020) pain-brain theory of preventing suicide, and Wong's (2007a, 2008) meaning-management model of grieving, my present new approach to mental health emphasizes the central role of the meaning management of suffering as the foundation of healing and wellbeing.



More specifically, this approach is known as the Pain-Brain-Culture way to achieve healing and flourishing because it depends on our abilities to simultaneously (a) make good use of our executive functions to solve daily problems, (b) learn life intelligence to address existential crises, and (c) enjoy the best possible life by embracing our core cultural values of faith, hope and love.

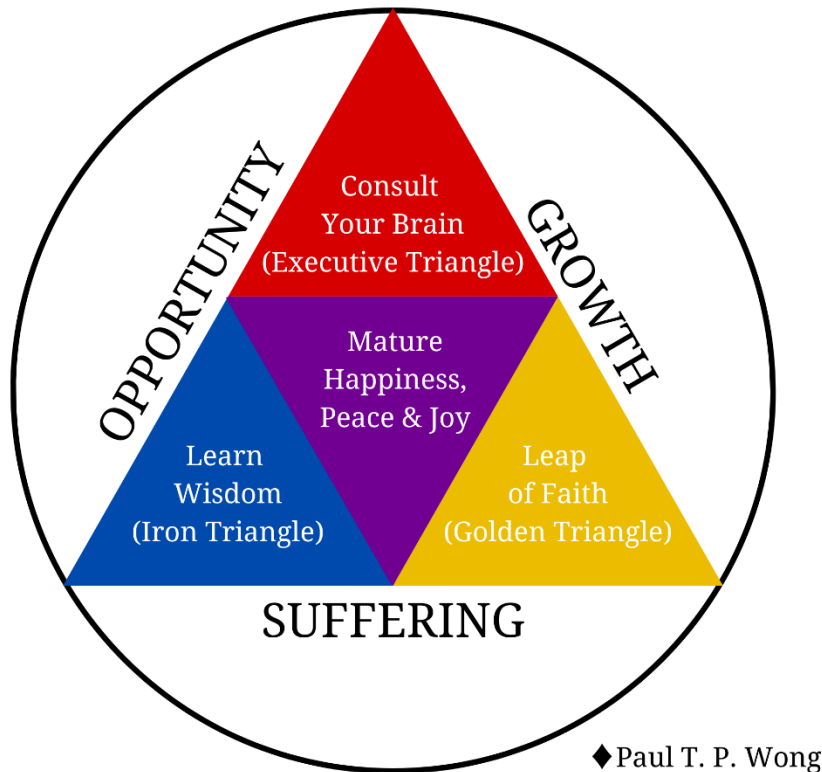
Having gone through the era of the pandemic, many people may still feel overwhelmed by existential threats and that life is out of control. Dr. Vivek Murthy, US Surgeon General (Bloomberg Presents, 2022), says the current mental health crisis is the biggest concern facing Americans. Maybe this is the main reason why people now are more attracted to my theory of finding meaning as an antidote to the mystery of human suffering – a recurrent theme in literature. F. Dostoevsky said, "The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for." Viktor Frankl (1946/1985) said, "In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."

Research has confirmed that in times of existential threats, people unconsciously seek to boost their self esteem and cultural defence against the terrors of death, as hypothesized by Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2002; Solomon et al., 1991) or consciously seek to live life fully with meaning and purpose as hypothesized by Wong's (2007a, 2008) meaning management theory.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the different pieces involved in the Pain-Brain-Culture way as a more effective solution to our mental health crisis. The medical model may provide a diagnosis of our symptoms and prescribe medication to numb our pain, but it cannot heal our inner turmoil, broken lives, and broken relationships (Garson, 2022; Wong & Laird, in press) which are the root causes of our suffering.

**Figure 3***The Pain-Brain-Culture Way to Mental Health*

The Pain-Brain-Culture Way Towards  
Mental Health and Sustainable Wellbeing



The circle in Figure 3 represents a world full of suffering, but also full of opportunities for personal growth. The executive triangle represents the first step of awareness of one's need for change and taking personal responsibility for coping with daily stress (Wong, 1993). In other words, we need to consult our brains in order to appraise situations accurately (Peacock & Wong, 1990) and make use of our resources to choose the appropriate coping strategies (Wong, et al., 2006).

The second step is represented by the iron triangle of learning existential intelligence (Gardner, 1999) or the wisdom of the soul (McLaughlin & McMinn, 2022; Wong, 2022a). This step involves learning the basic existential competencies as expressed in the serenity prayer of

Reinhold Niebuhr: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” We also need to learn to accept and transcend the inescapable struggles in every stage of normal human development (Erikson, 1963; Wong, 2021b; Worth, 2021).

Self-transcendence logically takes us to the third steps as symbolized by the golden triangle. This is perhaps the also most controversial because it is based on taking a leap of faith to dive into the deep end (Wong, 2022b,). Basically, it stresses the importance of meeting our spiritual needs for faith, hope and love.

Self-transcendence (Wong, Arslan, et al, 2021) represents a crucial breakthrough from the grips of egotistic concerns and carnal desires towards caring for others and serving a higher purpose, as Frankl (1946/1985) asserts:

Only to the extent that someone is living out this self transcendence of human existence, is he truly human or does he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self’s actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward.

### **How to Improve Your Mental Health and Wellbeing?**

In an earlier publication (Wong 2022c), I provided the seven principles of self-transcendence, which are basically seven laws of living a meaningful and healthy life. In this section, I will provide a step-by-step guide for each of the four triangles:

#### **The Executive Triangle**

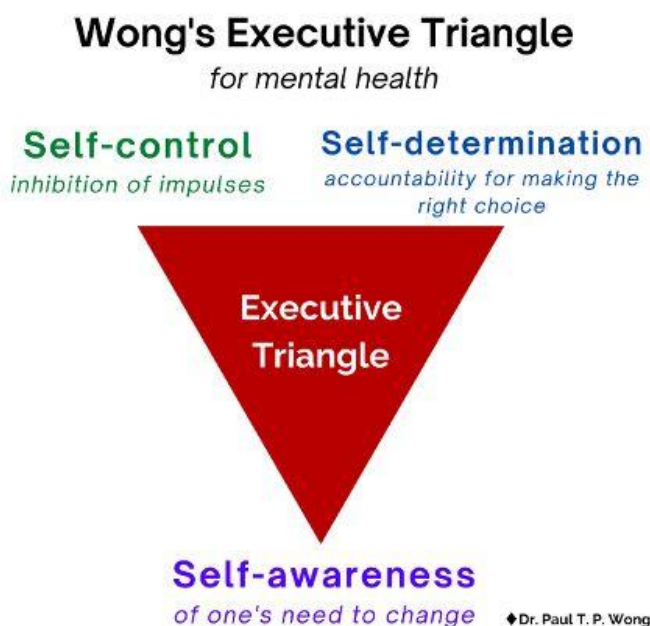
My Brain-Pain-Culture approach to mental health and wellbeing captures the ethos of our present existential crises and provides concrete steps to meet peoples’ conscious and unconscious

needs for meaning and spirituality. Given the centrality of transcending and transforming suffering from a variety of sources (Wong, et al., accepted), the major steps involving our executive functions are shown in Figure 4.

Our life can be happier and healthier if we take responsibility to consult our frontal cortex. We can avoid unnecessary and meaningless risks or mistakes by using our executive functions to appraise situations correctly (Wong, 1993; Robson, 2022).

**Figure 4**

*The Executive Triangle*



First of all, we need to confront our repressed shadow and become self-aware of our need for positive change. Without this enlightened awareness, no positive transformation is possible. This is a crucial first step for healing. The following quote is usually credited to Carl Jung:

“Unless you learn to face your own shadows, you will continue to see them in others, because the world outside you is only a reflection of the world inside you.”

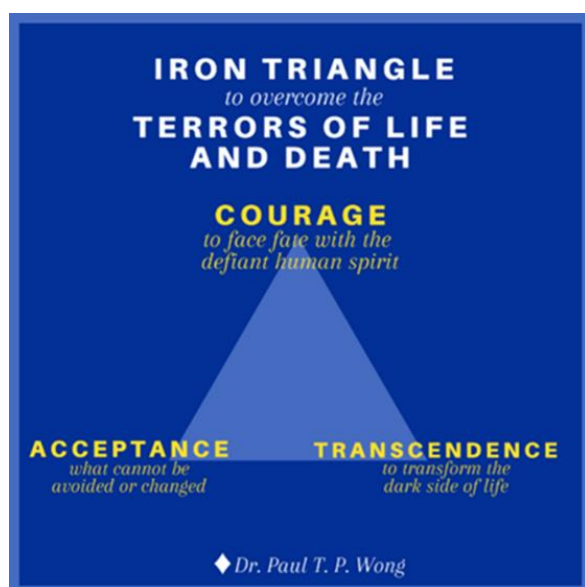
The second step is to take responsibility for self-improvement with determination and discipline. If we improve ourselves daily, and make incremental step towards achieving our dreams, our lives will eventually become better.

Thirdly, we need to learn self-control to keep our impulses in check. We need to learn how to practice deep-breathing and regulate one's own mood swings or emotional outburst. You can find more details about these practices in Wong, Cowden et al. (2022).

## The Iron Triangle

**Figure 5**

*The Iron Triangle*



In order to manage the big questions of life and death, we need courage to confront reality. We also need existential intelligence or wisdom of the soul, which can be learned from painful life experiences and from the sages in the past (Gardner, 1999; McLaughlin & McMinn, 2022; Vaillant, 1993; Wong, 2022a).

The universal principles of courage, acceptance and self-transcendence are essential for mature happiness and existential wellbeing because we need to confront and transcend all the

dark forces inside and outside us. For more details, see Wong, Mayer et al. (2021b) and Kashdan and Ciarrochi (2013),

Sometimes, our inner demons are our worst enemies because they can do more harm to us than anyone else. There are two reasons for such self-handicapping behaviors: (1) Self-deception or willful blindness to our inherent limitations can get us into all kinds of risky situations and (2) refusal to accept personal responsibility and covering up our own mistakes can cause us more trouble than our initial errors. If we simply accept life as it is and accept our own weaknesses, we can become wiser and stronger by learning from our mistakes.

### **The Golden Triangle**

The wisdom of transcendence naturally leads to the golden triangle of the cultural ideals of faith, hope and love, which provides a stable spiritual anchor in the midst of storms (see Figure 6). This is perhaps the most important and also the most difficult step to implement because people disagree on how to live a meaningful life, even though there is a broad consensus on the importance of mattering. We all want to feel that our lives matter in our own eyes, in the eyes of other people, and in the world; but people have different values and different ideas of what is the best way to achieve a sense of significance.

Broadly, there are two ways to achieve meaning or mattering: The self-enhancing way and the self-transcendent way. These two ways differ importantly in core values or life orientation but need not be mutually exclusive according to binary thinking. One needs humility and wisdom to navigate these two approaches according to each context.

Most people choose the self-enhancing way naturally because it appeals to one's ego and carnal desires. Without the wisdom of self-transcendence, without any fear of God, one may

become obsessed with the blind ambition of pursuing wealth, fame, and power to the point of compromising one's moral principles and sacrificing family and friends.

The deadly desire of pride, greed and control can not only blind one's eyes but also harden one's conscience to the point of inflicting pain on the self and others for some selfish gain. Pride or grandiose delusions may overcompensate one's inferiority complex by maintaining a false front of superiority and confidence (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). In order to enhance a sense of self-importance, one may also make extreme use of the common attribution bias of claiming credits for success and blaming others for failure, resulting in broken relationships.

In stark contrast, the self-transcendence approach derives satisfaction from serving others and/or doing one's best as unto God. The self-transcendent way as proposed by William James, Viktor Frankl, Robert Emmons, and Paul Wong adopts the philosophical stance of supernaturalism of spiritual striving and transformation. It requires a re-orientation from egotistic concerns for earthly gains to serving a higher purpose or the greater good. It also implicitly acknowledges the need to give an account for our lives before our Creator.

It is understandable that those who endorse a naturalistic philosophical stance take issue with the theistic position, even though they may agree that the self-transcendence approach is more likely to make life better for the self and others by avoiding the temptations of the success trap (Aitsi-Selmi, 2020; Johnston, 2018) and sexual misconduct (Strauss, 2017).

One can readily see why self-transcendence is an important breakthrough for positive transformation. One is challenged to do one's best to make a unique and creative contribution to society. In addition, one is encouraged to appreciate what they already have and express gratitude to others. Even in situations when their freedom is severely curtailed, they can still assert their attitudinal freedom of taking a heroic stance for what they believe. Finally, they

always want to do what is right by consulting their conscience and seeking approval from their God or Supra Meaning (Frankl, 1946/1985; Wong, 2014) in order to live a productive and meaningful life.

**Figure 6**

*The Golden Triangle*

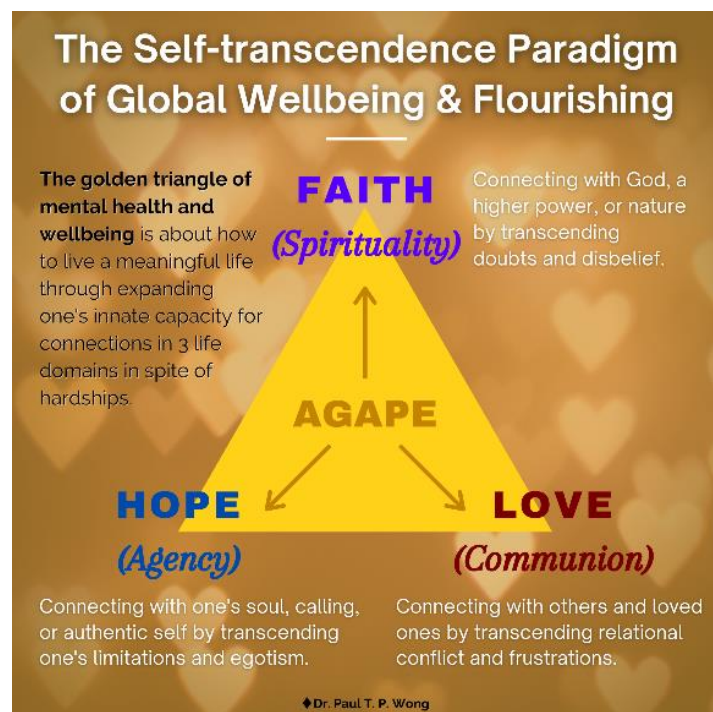


Figure 6 clearly show how mattering can meet people's mental health needs according to the self-transcendence model. Thus, my life matters to me because I have the hope of creating a worthwhile life by doing meaningful work to contribute some objective value to society. My life also matters to others because I am intimately connected with those who love me and accept me. Last but not the least, my life matters in the larger scheme of things because I have the faith to experience oneness with God as understood in my culture.

One more point about faith: to my clients overwhelmed and tormented by all kinds of existential crises beyond their control, such as the Ukraine refugee I mentioned earlier, I



routinely suggest to them that one of the most reasonable and scientifically validated way of coping with events beyond human control is faith in God or a Higher Power (Koenig, 2009; Weber & Pargament, 2014). Even Albert Camus said: “I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live as if there isn't and to die to find out that there is.” Another famous atheist, Jean Paul Sartre, even had a death bed conversion (Paul, 2018).

### **From Mental Illness to Mental Health**

Figure 7 shows that meaningful work, loving relationships, and faith in God are essential for our mental health as a good diet, water, and clean air are essential for physical health. Psychological disorders develop when there is a deficiency in meeting our basic spiritual/existential needs either because of a toxic culture or the failure of our education system to teach us the basics of mental health. From this new perspective, the stigma of mental illness will be replaced by compassion and health-promoting actions.

### **Figure 7**

*Essentials for Mental Health*



### **From Misery to Mature Happiness**

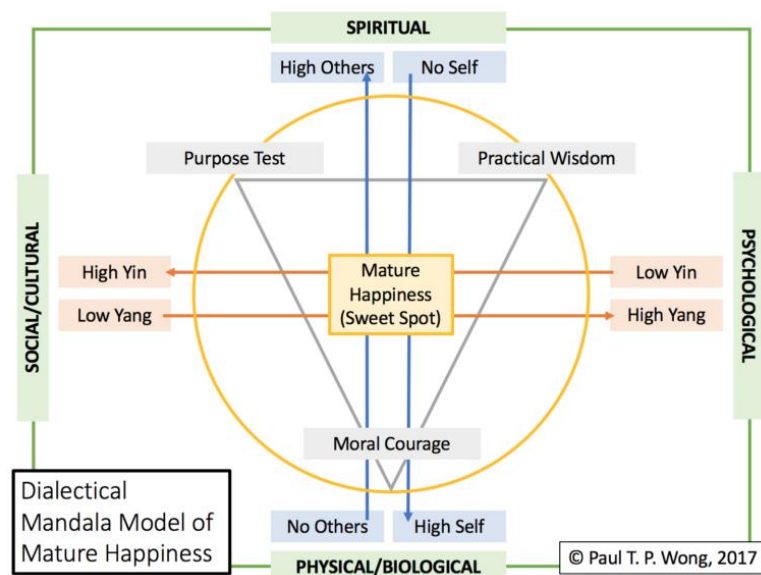
The appeal of my Pain-Brain-Culture model is that when we navigate an adaptive balance between the bright and negative sides of life through the dialectics of Yin-Yang or the dual-system model (Wong, 2012), we not only achieve mental health but also experience mature happiness regardless of circumstances (Wong & Bowers, 2018).

More specifically, we always need to manage an adaptive balance in the ongoing conflict between our spiritual yearnings for love, meaning, and faith (the golden triangle) and the dark emotions of guilt, shame, and fear (Mayer et al., 2021; Wong, 2019) or the tragic triad of guilt, suffering, and death (Frankl, 1946/1985).

Mature happiness (Figure 8) can also be understood as deep happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2016) or authentic-durable happiness (Dambrun et al., 2012) with its emphasis on harmony, contentment, and inner peace.

**Figure 8**

*Dialectical Mandala Model of Mature Happiness*



It is worth noting that Yin and Yang are not two opposite poles on a single dimension but two independent and complementary dimensions like the bright and dark halves of the Taiji symbol as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**

*The Taiji (Yin-Yang) Symbol*



In sum, the Pain-Brain-Culture way provides an alternative road map to mental health and sustainable wellbeing. The journey of moving from brokenness to wholeness is never easy: it requires patience, persistence, and faith in the healing process. Unlike the medical disease model, this new approach does not just aim at removing the symptoms as measured by the DSM-5 but seeks to heal our brokenness and restore wholeness and a high level of SEW as described in the introduction of this paper.

One naturally wonders: Why does mainstream psychology or the media pay little attention to this promising practical alternative? Why don't we see it taught in school and employed by mental health professionals? In the following section, I identify the two major barriers that prevent people from accepting the self-transcendent way of achieving mental health.

### **What are the Barriers to SEW?**

I propose that there are two cultural barriers that prevent this new approach from being widely disseminated: Increasing secularization and a pleasure-oriented consumerist culture.

### **The Decline of Religious or Spiritual Values**

More specifically, the advance of technology and secularism has eclipsed spiritual development (Ertit, 2018; Sotillos, 2022). Increase in secularization contributes to the decline in religious beliefs (Austin, 1980; Ken, 2019). Therefore, highly developed and secularized societies may hinder the practice of prayer and religious coping (Pargament, 1997; Smith, 2018), which are especially important for cancer care (Vallurupalli et al., 2012) and palliative care (Richardson, 2014).

In addition to Paul Tillich (1952/1963) and Viktor Frankl (1946/1985), May (1953/2009) believes that religion can play a positive role in endowing life with meaning:

"We define religion as the assumption that life has meaning. Religion, or lack of it, is shown not in some intellectual or verbal formulations but in one's total orientation to life.... One's religious attitude is to be found at that point where he has a conviction that there are values in human existence worth living and dying for." (p. 180)

### **The Neglect of the Suffering Factor**

American culture has a long history of being obsessed with personal success and happiness as evident in the popularity of self-actualization according to humanistic psychology and current positive psychology championed by Seligman and associates (Wong, in press-a).

In this materialistic and individualistic culture, suffering has a bad rap, desperately in need of a mega shift in our cultural narrative and mainstream psychology (Wong, Ho et al., 2022). At present, the paradigm of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain (Freud's Pleasure Principle, Neal Miller's model of approach-avoidance conflict) still dominates mainstream psychology. As a result, suffering remains a missing link in wellbeing research (Fowers et al., 2017; Soper, 2020; Wong, 2022d).

As I have discussed earlier, both the happiness craze and the tendency to avoid/escape reality through addiction or distraction are major causes of our unhappiness. That is why without learning how to overcome and transform suffering, all our attempts to be happy are doomed to fail. Maybe that is why we have global rising unhappiness (Clifton, 2022). Even when we have achieved all the things that are supposed to make us happy, something always intrudes to spoil our happiness, because suffering, like gravity, is pervasive and inescapable. We need to adopt a more positive attitude towards suffering.

There are hopeful signs of a paradigm shift (Harvard Human Flourishing Program, 2022; Wong, Cowden et al, 2022). In addition to Rashid and Brooks (2022), two recent major books also highlight the importance of suffering: Paul Bloom (2021) Susan Cain (2022)

Suffering is an umbrella term that includes both external stressful/painful events and disasters beyond our control, as well as inner demons; sometimes, it is more difficult to deal with our own emotions – mood swings, tempers, and desires – than dealing with bad people.

From our EPP perspective, suffering is not only a messenger tell us that something is out of balance, but also essential for growth. According to Rollo May, “One does not become fully human painlessly.” Adversity is necessary for growth and creativity because it forces one to learn endurance and to dig deeper to discover something new about oneself.

How to overcome and transform suffering (Bland, 2020; Mayer, 2021; Wong & Yu, 2021) has already moved to the front and center of our consciousness and cultural narrative during the pandemic. At the same time, the perils of pursuing happiness (Wong, 2007b; Zerwas & Ford, 2021) and the harmful effects of toxic positivity (Kaufman, 2021; Princing, 2021; Scully, 2020; Villines, 2021) have attracted increasing public attention.

Buddhist psychology has been the strongest advocate of ending suffering. Its first noble truth is that life is suffering because our desires for carnal happiness and our ignorance of the impermanence of life (Hanh, n.d.; Targ & Hurtak, 2006; Thera, 2004).

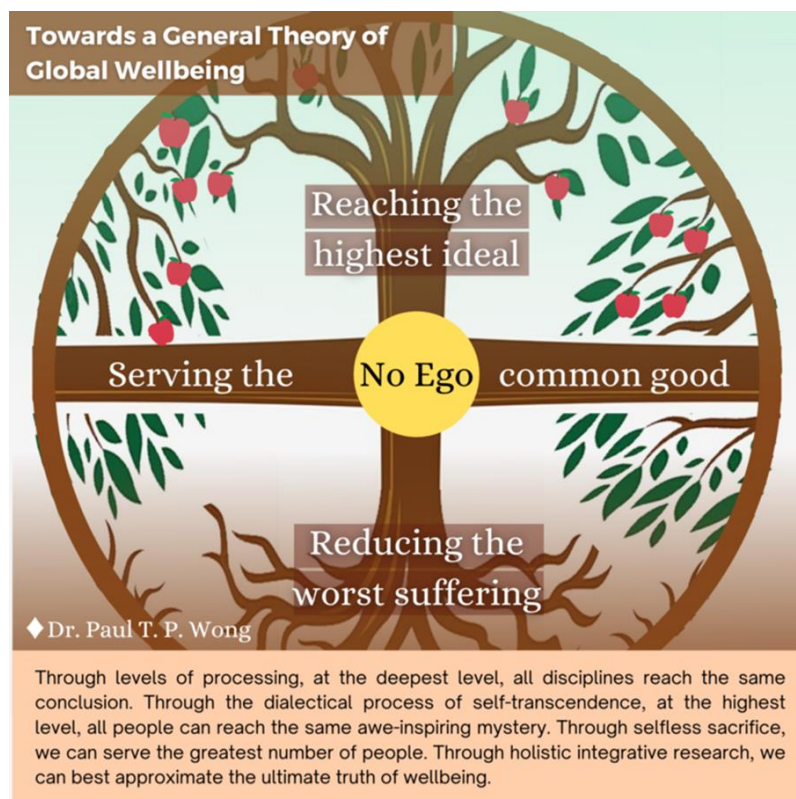
In addition to self-inflicted suffering, there are also systemic problems that require a collective solution, such as discrimination, injustice, and poverty that contributes to crimes and miseries. Recently Moghaddam (2022) pointed out that psychology has failed to address the needs of disadvantaged minorities. In addition, Lee and Mayor (2023) provides an even broader analysis of “the ontological interconnectedness”; they too go beyond the narrow medical model and favour a more holistic, interdisciplinary understanding that “transcends a focus on physical infirmity and locates the individual in social, ecological, and spiritual contexts.”

Thus, it takes the wisdom from the humanities and the total mobilization of all sectors of a society, from different levels of governments, corporations, non-profits, social institutions, and individual working together to make the world a better place. That is why I am now advocating for a new science of suffering and new cultural narrative (Wong, Ho et al., 2022).

Central to this new science is that both meaningful suffering and faith in a spiritual realm are essential for mental health, contrary to the secular culture which has blindsided people from knowing they need really need for healing and wellbeing. Figure 10 illustrates this point clearly.

## **Figure 10**

*The Self-transcendence Model of Flourishing*



Instead of seeing suffering as something to be avoided at all costs, my new model sees suffering as necessary for flourishing just as a tree must sink its roots deep into the dark soil to grow and bear much fruit. Also, instead of dismissing the invisible, transcendental reality as irrational or unscientific, the new model sees religious beliefs or secular spirituality as a way to encourage people to aim at the highest ideals in order to provide a strong intrinsic motivation for them to grow and flourish.

### **Conclusion: A New Model of Mental Health**

Having explained the process of how to achieve mental health and total wellbeing, we are now ready to provide a complete picture of this new model of mental health, which challenges the prevailing view that human flourishing happens only when things are going well, and when people enjoy both the absence of symptoms and the presence of wellbeing.

**Figure 11**



## *A New Model of Mental Health*

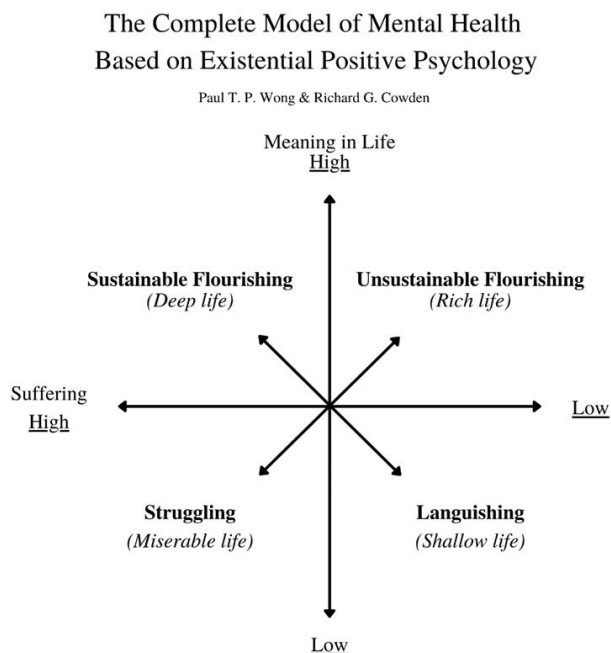


Figure 11 indicates that suffering is necessary for sustainable flourishing. This is exactly my position on successful aging, which does not depend on the absence of illness or handicaps but depends on one's ability for meaning transformation and spirituality (Wong, 1989, 1998).

Also contrary to popular beliefs, the absence of suffering and meaning results in a shallow life that cannot bear the burden of Being and the terrors of dying. Even if one has a sense of meaning, a life of comfort and privilege will only lead to unsustainable flourishing. The key to mental health is whether you can manage to maintain a sense of meaning and still say “yes” to life in spite of all the difficulties (Wong, 2020a).

According to the EPP perspective (Wong et al., accepted) most mental and emotional disorders can be attributed to (a) our broken relationships with ourselves—the inner tumult of a divided self, (b) our broken relationships with family, friends, and the community—torn by endless misunderstanding, conflicts, and power struggle, and (c) our broken relationship with God—we are separated and alienated from God by our unbelief, pride, and sin. Therefore, the

spiritual remedy for brokenness and suffering depends on healing our brokenness and transforming suffering (Wong & Laird, in press).

Integrative meaning therapy (Wong 2010, 2016, 2020b) focuses on the fundamental human needs for meaning, relationship, and spiritual faith, with the human quest for meaning (self-transcendence) as its central organizing construct, and inner peace as its desirable outcome. Figure 12 shows that even in difficult times, meaning is still the key to total wellbeing.

**Figure 12**

*Total Wellness*

Total Wellness Challenge Involving  
Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Processes

♦ Paul T. P. Wong



First of all, our physical health depends on us assuming full responsibility of our physical needs for diet, exercise, and sleep, and more importantly, it depends on whether we are able to live a worthwhile life. According to Soper (2020), suicide occurs when our brain is developed enough to know the horrible fact that we can end our own lives if we think that life is not worth living, and there is no good reason to continue enduring all the hardship and suffering.

Recent news report huge increases in suicidal ideation in teens (Rogers, 2022) and children (Christensen, 2022). Most likely, they have witnessed so much death and suffering during the pandemic, and their brains are matured enough to entertain the idea of suicide.

In addition, the Government of Canada (2022) recently allowed people to get Medically Assistance in Dying (MAID) if they claim to have mental illness or feel that life is unbearable as in the case of Michael (Cribb et al., 2022). Last year, over 10,000 Canadians sought out MAID. This slippery slope may eventually lead to a culture of death if we don't educate people how to endure hardships and develop meaningful suffering. We need to follow the three spiritual laws of love and compassion as shown in the golden triangle:

1. **Love yourself.** Our first responsibility is to love the self. At a deeper level, self compassion really means getting to know and becoming connected with your true self and to discover your calling or meaning. To be connected with our true self and calling through self-compassion (Neff, 2015) is an essential step for mental health.
2. **Love your neighbours as yourself.** Life is more meaningful when we have love. Suffering becomes meaningful when our sacrifices and sufferings can bring some value or joy to our loved ones. The best way to love others is to present our best selves – our transformed selves as a gift to them.
3. **Love God with all your heart, mind and soul and fear his commandments.** This law makes the other two laws possible by providing faith which allows us to access the spiritual resources we need to love ourselves and others (Rosmarin, 2021). It is also the basis for our ultimate meaning.

Whether one believes in God or not will not change that fact that we are spiritual beings with a soul that needs to be fed. We all have a spiritual yearning, whether we realize this or not,

to be connected with our innermost being, with others, and with God or with nature. One cannot achieve total wellbeing by neglecting the spiritual dimension of meaning.

### **Meaning-Management Theory**

How to live a meaningful life and achieve total wellbeing is a challenging task, especially maintaining a sense of meaning in turbulent times. The important role of meaning and purpose for our wellbeing is supported by a mountain of empirical research (Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Wong, 2012). At present, many people are wrestling with finding meaning and purpose in their work, marriage, or life. However, these difficulties are greatly simplified if we can re-orient ourselves from the happiness-success mindset to the meaning mindset of serving the common good or a higher purpose. This reorientation will result in self-transcendence or serving a greater good as illustrated by the following quote from Dalai Lama: “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them.”

Initially, I developed the meaning management model as a way to manage our death anxiety and the grieving process (Wong, 2007a, 2008). In those articles, I also pointed out the need to manage the two general life tasks of (a) protecting ourselves against the terror of death and the pain of losing a loved one, and (b) fulfilling our aspirations by managing all our resources in order to overcome setbacks and the terror of living. This is how I initially defined meaning management:

Meaning management capitalizes on the human capacities for awareness, reflection, imagination, symbolization, self-transcendence, creativity, narrative construction, and all sorts of meaning-based processes...Therefore, meaning management of our inner life involves making sure that our actions service our deepest psychological and spiritual

needs. When people are centered in who they are and what they really want in life, they are able to focus their actions on life goals that really matter to them.

In the present paper, the three triangle provide concrete steps in meaning management, which enable us to become stronger and live meaningfully no matter what life throws at us.

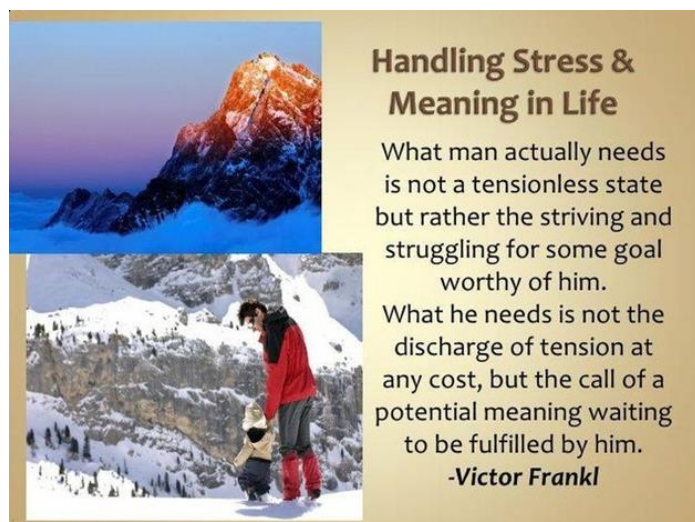
### **The Key Ingredients of Mental Health and SEW**

The biggest lies our culture teaches are (a) we no longer need God because science and technology can solve all our problems and enable us to live happily and (b) the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate goal; all we need to do is to avoid or get around suffering. I have already discussed why these two barriers prevent us from what we really need for mental health. The brutal truth is that what we hate most turns out to be what we need most for mental health and wellbeing. In sum, the two key ingredients for SEW are (a) enduring suffering and (b) believing in God. This may be hard for people to swallow, but they really need these ingredients to heal their brokenness and to restore them to mental health.

Mental health is best achieved not by a living a happy, care-free, stress-free life, but by living a life of constant struggle for a worthy goal. It is the tension and striving that strengthens every one of our mental “muscles” and makes us feel fully alive. Mental health does not result from the absence of struggles and symptoms (see Frankl’s quote in Figure 13), but from our courage, faith, and ability to transform suffering into blessing.

### **Figure 13**

*Handling Stress and Meaning in Life (From Frankl, 1946/1985)*



The path of suffering is a hero's journey of growth: Viktor Frankl's (1946/1985) meaning of suffering, Joseph Campbell's (2008) hero's journey, Scott Peck's (1978) road less travelled, Jordan Peterson's (2018) twelve rules of life as antidote to chaos and suffering, and Robert Emmons' (2003) deepest desires for the good life. I only have space to cite from one of the above:

The good life' is not one that is achieved through momentary pleasures or defensive illusions, but through meeting suffering head on and transforming it into opportunities for meaning, wisdom, and growth, with the ultimate objective being the development of the person into a fully functioning mature being. On this formula for happiness, age-old wisdom and modern science are in agreement. (Emmons, 2003, p. 156)

I like to end this paper with the following simple set of spiritual exercises which we can practice daily in order to boost mature happiness and SEW (Figure 14).

#### **Figure 14**

*Activities to Boost Selfless or Mature Happiness*

**ACTIVITIES TO BOOST SELFLESS OR MATURE HAPPINESS  
ACCORDING TO EXISTENTIAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (PP 2.0)**

1. Count your blessings in times of suffering.
2. Practice the golden rule of loving others as yourself.
3. Write an apology letter to repair relationships.
4. Practice mindful and meaningful living.
5. Strive towards worthy goals.
6. Improve yourself daily towards your best possible self.
7. Accept your worst self in order to become whole and authentic.
8. Treat people with kindness because everyone is suffering.
9. Remember the kind deeds from others and do the same to others.
10. Savor the bittersweet memories of those who were a major part of your life.

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