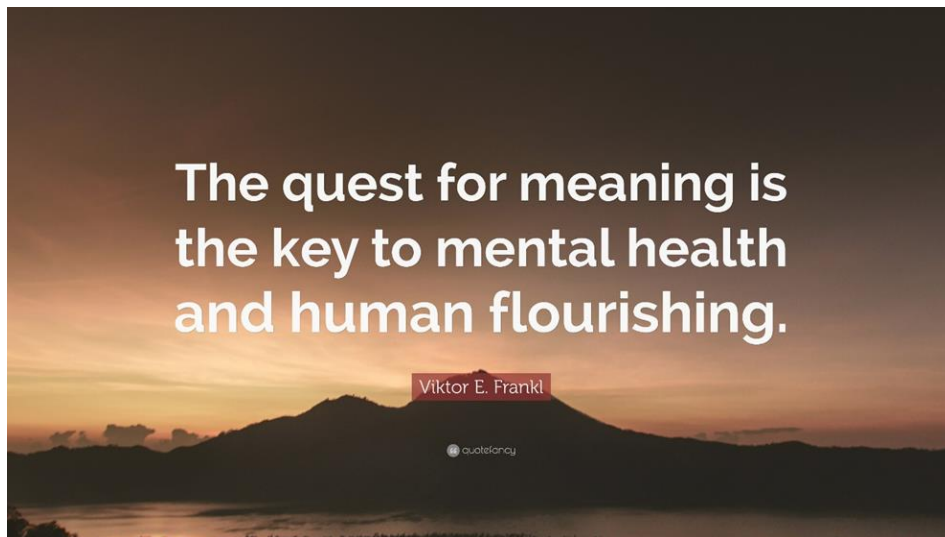


Adventures with Viktor Frankl and Advances in Logotherapy (AEPP01)

Chapter 8: Meaning is the Key to Mental Health and Human Flourishing

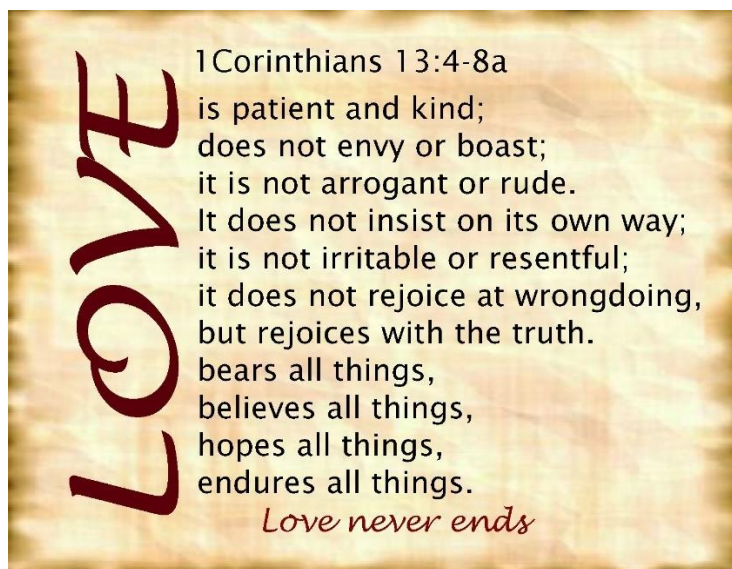
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Chapter 7 Recap

The last chapter focused on the How of meaning. Together, the general principles and special techniques encapsulate the essence of spiritual activation based on the power of love, faith, and meaning.

We need to activate the spiritual dimension of people in order to awaken their awareness of their need for change; we also need to nurture the soul and kindle their passion for living in order to help clients achieve healing and personal transformation.

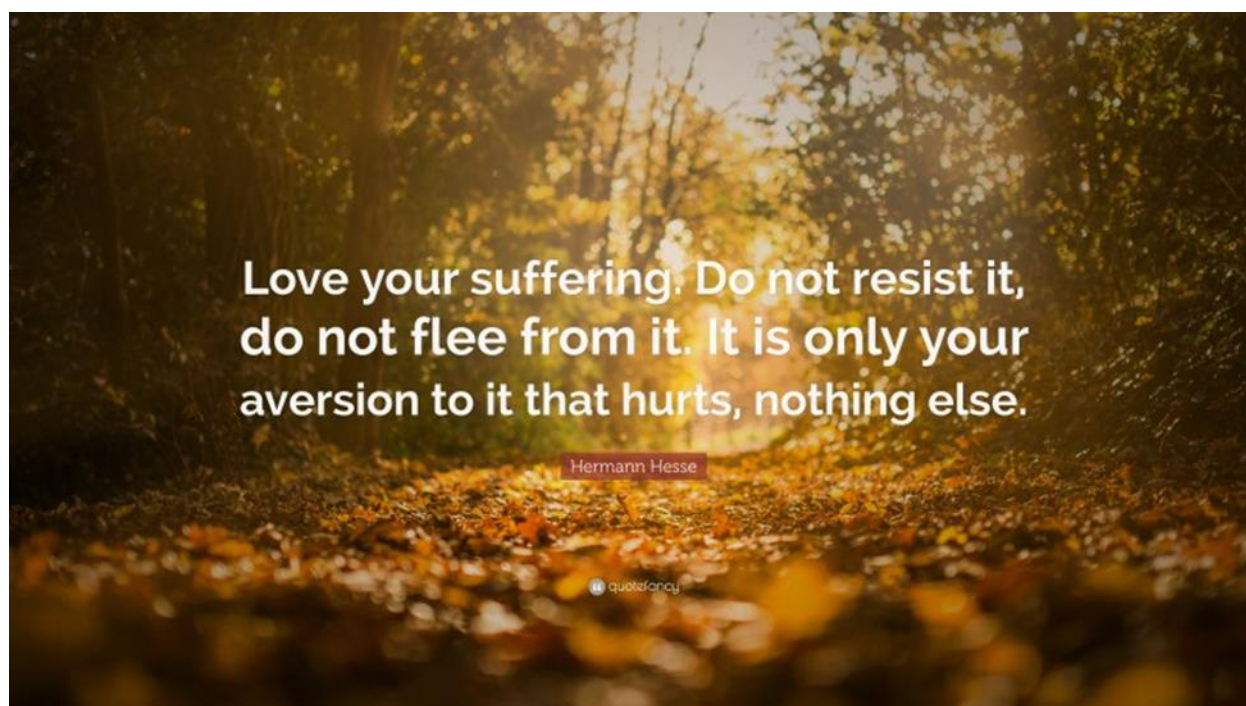


Abstract

We have arrived at the end of our adventure with Viktor Frankl (see this [video from Frankl](#)). We can now step back and look at the big picture of Frankl's teachings in the larger context of the human need for mental health and flourishing.

Throughout this adventure, the recurrent theme is that an adventure would not be exciting and worthwhile if it does not include risks, obstacles, and struggles. A ship is not made for staying in the safe harbour; it is made for sailing in the open sea and risking the dangers of storms and capsizing.

Once we understand that suffering is essential for healing and growth, we will stop running away from inescapable suffering and start embracing it. That is the only way to make your life a meaningful and exciting adventure.



I plan to frame today's chapter from the broad issues about mental illness: (1) Let's talk about mental illness, (2) Let's understand the meaning of mental illness, and (3) Let's do something about mental illness.

Within the context of our urgent need for mental health, this chapter proposes that a faith-based and meaning-centered approach provides the most promising way to achieve mental health and human flourishing.

Let's discover why positive mental health needs to be based on understanding the meaning of life, meaning of suffering, and meaning of love with four mindsets essential for personal growth: Mindfulness Mindset, Meaningfulness Mindset, Dialectical Mindset and Resilient Mindset.

Introduction

Martin Seligman is only partially right when he says that my obsession with the positive psychology of suffering is **either** madness **or** passion. It would be more accurate to attribute **both** madness **and** passion to this old man.

Even my best friends think that I am crazy. Out of concern, they often ask me: When do you still work so hard every day? Why can't you just enjoy your retirement like all your friends and colleagues?

In fact, I even ask myself the same questions right now: During this Christmas season, why can't you take a holiday? Why are you still working so hard on teaching Frankl's way of turning suffering to healing and flourishing?

My first answer is that it both breaks my heart and enrages me to see so many kind and bright children depressed and afraid to go to school. Some even think about suicide, even when they have loving parents and have no shortage of material comforts. What is happening in today's world that is driving these kids crazy? How can we make this world a better place for the next generation and for our grandchildren? What can we do to prevent mental illness and provide timely counselling to children and teens (Weeks, 2023)?

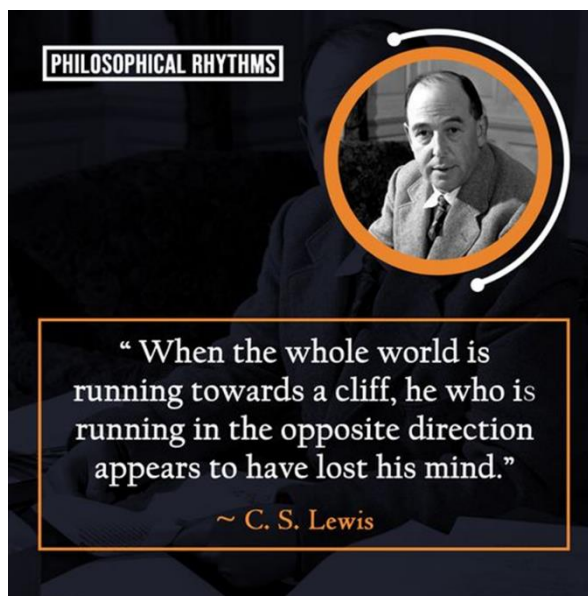
My second but related answer is that it both agonizes and infuriates me to see human beings perpetuating violence against women and girls. Even animals do not stoop that low ethically. How can we maintain human decency and dignity in a world that treat people as instruments? How can we protect people from those monsters? How can we keep our sanity in an insane world? How can we help people survive and thrive in a cruel and absurd world?

My third answer is much more difficult. Why and when did I become both crazy and passionate? What made me think that a little Asian man from nowhere can revolutionize psychology and change the world? I do not have a big microphone, nor do I have a big platform. I am just an old man without any institutional support. How can I change the world? How can I change people's lives? Why should people listen to me?

I cannot remain silent when I see people inflict pain on each other rather than learning how to live together in peace. Even if only a few people listen to me, it is still very meaningful and worthwhile to me.

In short, if you can hear my heart beat behind my every word, you will no longer think that I am crazy.

Furthermore, if you knew how I was rescued from the deep pit of depression by God's grace, you will understand why I am passionate about being a witness to others to show them how to get the help they desperately need.



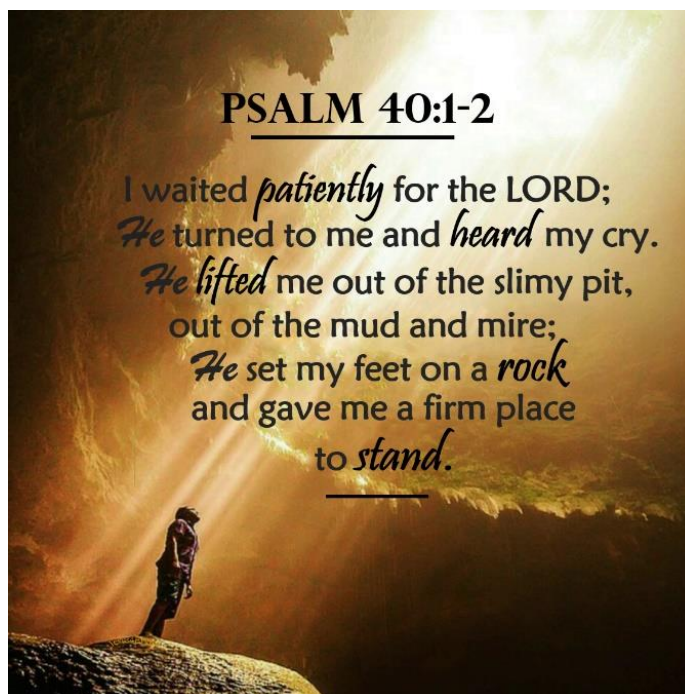
My real calling came much later, when [Clyde M. Narramore](#) came to Toronto Bible College (now [Tyndale University](#)) and challenged us to serve God through psychology because “everyone is worth our understanding.” He later found the [Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology](#). This happened more than 60 years ago, but I have never stayed away from my calling.

It did not take long before I realized that to follow Christ is to deny ourselves and sacrifice everything. I gave up my [successful research career at Trent University](#) to teach at [Trinity Western University](#). In addition, I refused to join the hit parade of pursuing happiness by flipping the script and asking people to embrace suffering. This sounded like madness to many people.

Long before me, Frankl had already set an example of remaining true to his calling even at the risk of ruining his own career. It was both difficult and painful for him to get expelled by both Freud and Adler for challenging their teachings and setting up his Third Vienna School of psychotherapy (Krasovska & Mayer, 2021). I can imagine the kind of oppositions and struggles he had to overcome in the mental health community, especially when his concept of meaning in terms of self-transcendence or logos was incomprehensible to those who turned a blind eye to the spiritual nature of human beings.

It is not easy for people to grasp the important paradoxical truth of winning by losing, and becoming strong through weakness. As Apostle Paul wrote: “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” (2 Corinthians 12:10). This paradoxical principle underlies Frankl’s teaching and our existential positive psychology.

Another important factor is time. The year 2023 will soon become history. That is why I need to make the best use of my time on earth to share what I have learned with as many people as possible. As the Bible reminds us: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5:15-16)



Quote of the Week

„What is demanded of man is not, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms. Logos is deeper than logic.“

**Viktor E. Frankl in:
 “Man’s Search for Meaning“**

www.franklzentrum.org

Let's Talk About Mental Illness

We all get sick sometimes in our lives. We are more likely to get sick in old age. There is no shame, no stigma for getting physical illness. In fact, some types of physical disease, such as cancer, may even attract attention and sympathy.

Then why is there a stigma attached to mental illness? Anyone with a history of mental illness often have difficulty getting a job or getting accepted as normal people as if that there is something wrong with that person's character or reasoning capacity. Worse still, some people even suspect a mentally ill person may commit random acts of violence, even when the relationship between mental illness and violence is a complex one, and research has debunked the myth that people with mental illness are somehow dangerous to society (Better Health Channel, n.d.; DeAngelis, 2022). In fact, many of the mentally ill are more prone to harming themselves than others.

Almost all people have some mental health issues, such as suffering from loneliness and the deprivation of love, helplessness because of repeated failure or rejection, non-acceptance of one's own limitations, and early children trauma because of toxic and abusive parents.

Such hardships may be more common than you think. The good news is that some people may become stronger and better people, although some may become bitter and resentful because of their difficulties in coping with such adversities. However, only a small percentage may become clinical cases which may need medication and/or psychotherapy.

Recently Wong and Laird (2023) listed many everyday conditions that may leads to adjustment problems and mental illness. From my research on the positive psychology of suffering, I have reported how frustration can lead to either aggression or invigoration, depression or a change of life goal (Wong, 1995), and trauma can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Growth (Wong & Worth, 2017). Similarly, the tragic triad can either leads to aggression, addiction or depression, or tragic optimism (Frankl, 1946/1985; Wong, 2009).

No one chooses to be mentally ill. Under certain circumstances, everyone has a breaking point and becomes mentally ill. I confessed in my last chapter that I had a mental breakdown because of a combination of a prolonged period of excruciating pain, lack of sleep, and lack of food. That has not prevented me from a complete recovery and moving on to be a successful psychologist. During my season of suffering, I drew a great deal of strength and inspiration from The First Letter of Peter, which addressed to persecuted Christians living in five regions of Asia Minor exhorts the readers to emulate the suffering Christ in their distress and suffering (Skaggs, 2021).

You may be wondering: What can we do to prevent mental illness? I will address this question in detail later. Meanwhile, the most important thing is your willingness to talk about mental health issues without feeling ashamed or guilty.

**The struggle of life
is one of our greatest
blessings. It makes us
patient, sensitive, and
Godlike. It teaches us that
although the world is full of
suffering, it is also full of
the overcoming of it.**

HELEN KELLER

VERYBESTQUOTES.COM

Yes, talk to someone you trust, whether it is a personal friend, a pastor, or a psychotherapy; tell them what is eating your soul and breaking your heart. The beginning of healing is simply bringing it to the open.

Immediately, we will face another challenge: Which friend can I really trust? Who can be my confidant? In a world full of fake friends or superficial relationships, with whom can you share your inner pains and struggles? With whom do you feel safe and unconditionally accepted without judgment? Even in a church setting, do you feel safe to share your dark secrets without worrying about being the target of a whispering campaign?

The third obstacle preventing us from talking about mental illness is that in a world where people worship money and success, and where some even strive to gain the whole world but forfeiting their souls, suffering remains a taboo topic, while happiness is the buzzword. I have learned the painful truth that you will risk rejection if you talk about suffering and the need for God's redemption.

The above factors may have contributed to many celebrity suicides (Russo, 2021). Humanly speaking, it is difficult to understand why hugely successful people who have everything the world offers would take their own lives.

I am also puzzled why some of my clients who are very successful by worldly standards could be so miserable, tormented by their addiction, marital problems or inner emptiness. By talking to me, they were able to find healing and wholeness.

Therefore, it may be your best investment in yourself to get some professional help when you need it. The next section will clarify what it means to be mentally ill.



Let's Understand the Meaning of Mental Illness

The Language of Mental Illness

Often, people talk about “mental health issues” when they are actually concerned about “mental illness.” Therefore, without a clear understanding of the language of mental health and mental illness, it is very difficult to achieve a good assessment of one’s own mental status.

Here is a good start. “Mental health problems” does not mean “mental illness”; it actually means diminished mental capacities or diminished capacities for emotional or behavioral control (image from UBC Student Health and Wellbeing Staff, 2021).

Mental Health and Mental Illness

Mental health

Capacity to think, feel, and act in ways that enhance our ability to:

- Enjoy life
- Deal with challenges

Mental health problems

Diminished capacities (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, etc.) that interfere with:

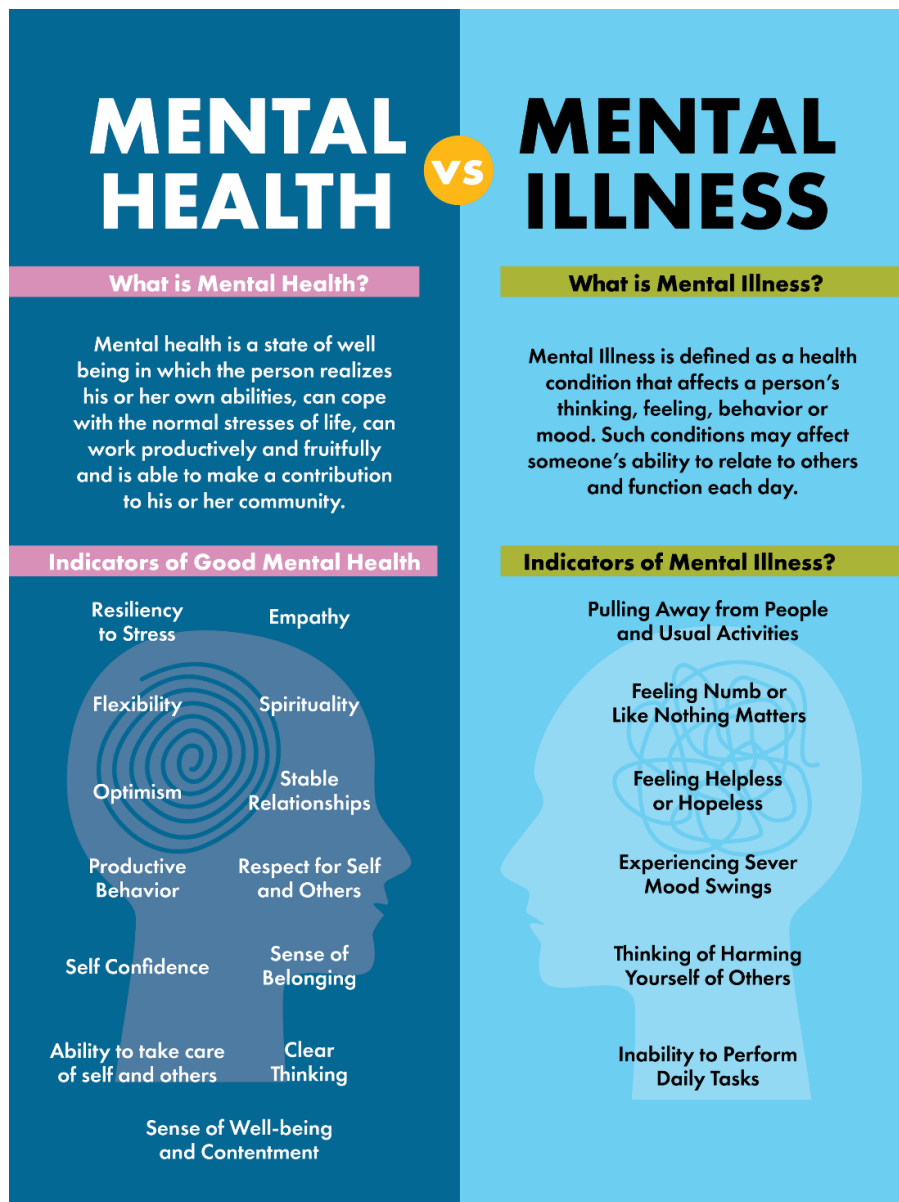
- Enjoyment of life
- Interactions with society and our environment

Mental illness

Conditions that affect a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, or behaviour, including:

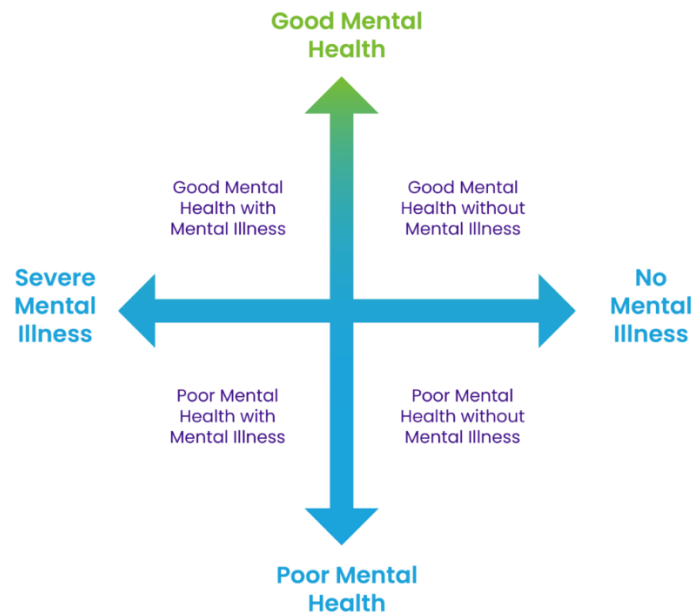
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Here is a more elaborate differentiation between mental health and mental illness (below image from Here for Texas, n.d.). When your mental state or normal capacities are disrupted rather than diminished, and when the disruption is severe enough to adversely affect your ability to function or relate to others, you may benefit from professional assessment and treatment.



To further complicate matters, the mental health community tends to favor a two-dimensional model of mental health. Thus, one may have symptoms of mental illness but can still enjoy good mental health. For example, one of my clients is both successful and happy in his work and marriage, but he has difficulty in relating to others and has been diagnosed as suffering from autism disorder. In fact, many famous people have similar disorders (Behavioural Innovations, 2021). Furthermore, many creative geniuses have mental illness (Jokipii, 2022).

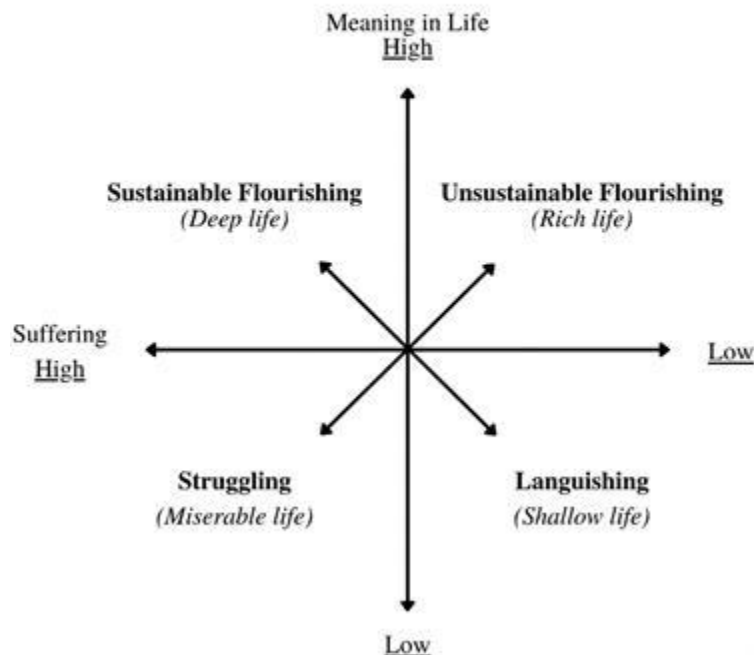
This two-dimensional model casts mental illness in a more positive light (see the below Figure from School Mental Health Ontario, 2022). Mental illness does not automatically mean hopelessness or character defect. It is just something just happens because many things in this world can drive us crazy; and many things within us can also become full blown mental illness given the right circumstances or triggers.



I have gone even further than the conventional dual-system model by proposing that a great deal of suffering may be something desirable because the best possible life can only be achieved by overcoming and transforming suffering as we have learned in the last chapter (see the Figure below from Wong & Laird, 2023).

The Complete Model of Mental Health Based on Existential Positive Psychology

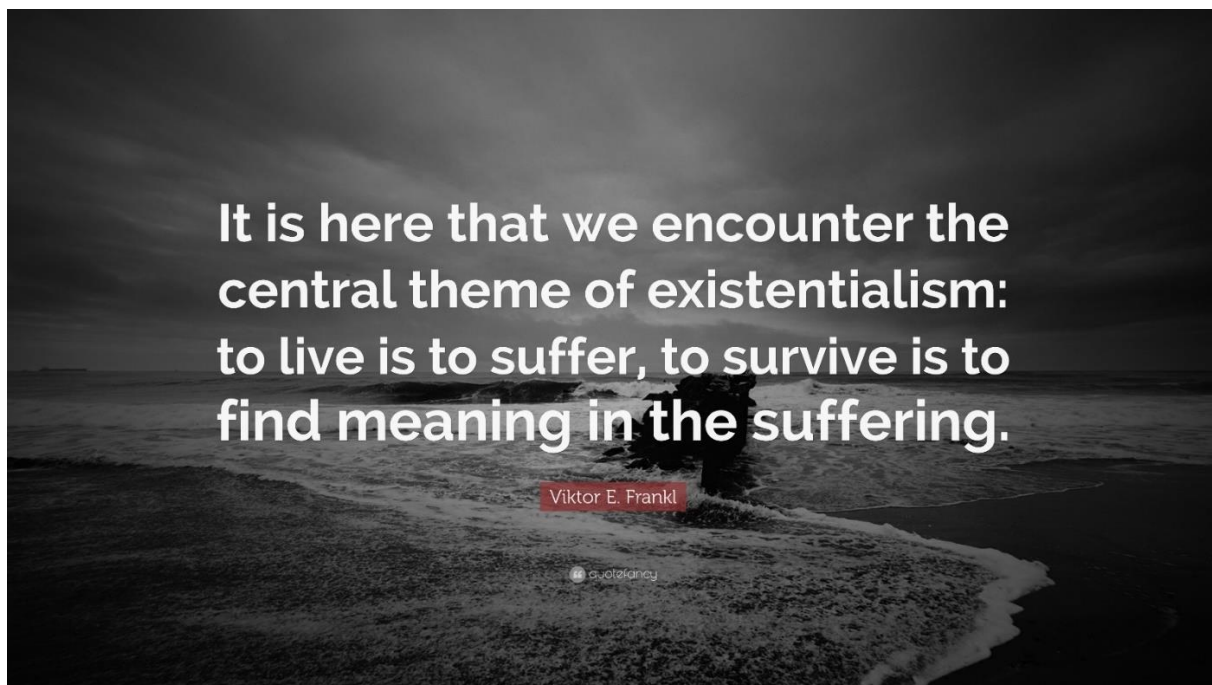
Paul T. P. Wong & Richard G. Cowden



According to my model, only a small percentage of people are struggling and vulnerable to mental illness and the majority are quite resilient. Therefore, the interesting question is not “what makes us mentally ill?”, but “what makes us resilient when so many things in life are so toxic and noxious?” By reframing the mental illness question, we can have a more uplifting and constructive conversation about mental illness. This model sets the stage for the existential wellbeing enjoyed by those living a deep life in troubled times (Wong, 2022).

The Meaning of Suffering and Mental Illness

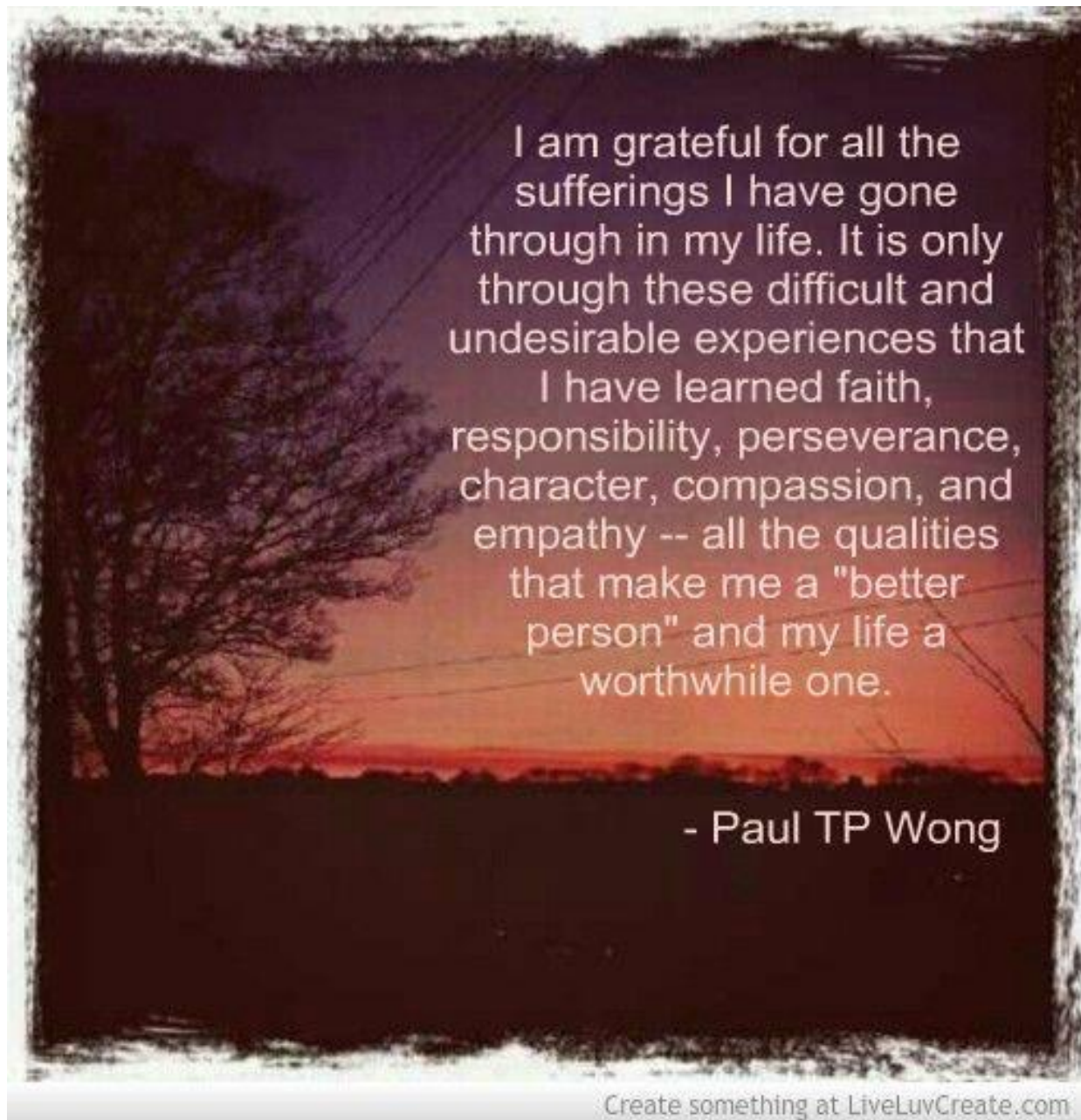
It is only fitting to remind ourselves of Frankl’s groundbreaking discovery that one cannot understand the meaning of life without understanding the meaning of suffering. In fact, the key to understanding mental health and flourishing is discover the meaning of suffering as illustrated by my graph earlier.



This is especially true in my own life. As mentioned earlier, I would not have been redeemed and transformed without first hitting rock bottom. I would not have a long and creative life, without the painful experience of rejected and told that I am not good enough. Consistent with my own frustration theory, I just have to work tirelessly to improve myself even in my old age.

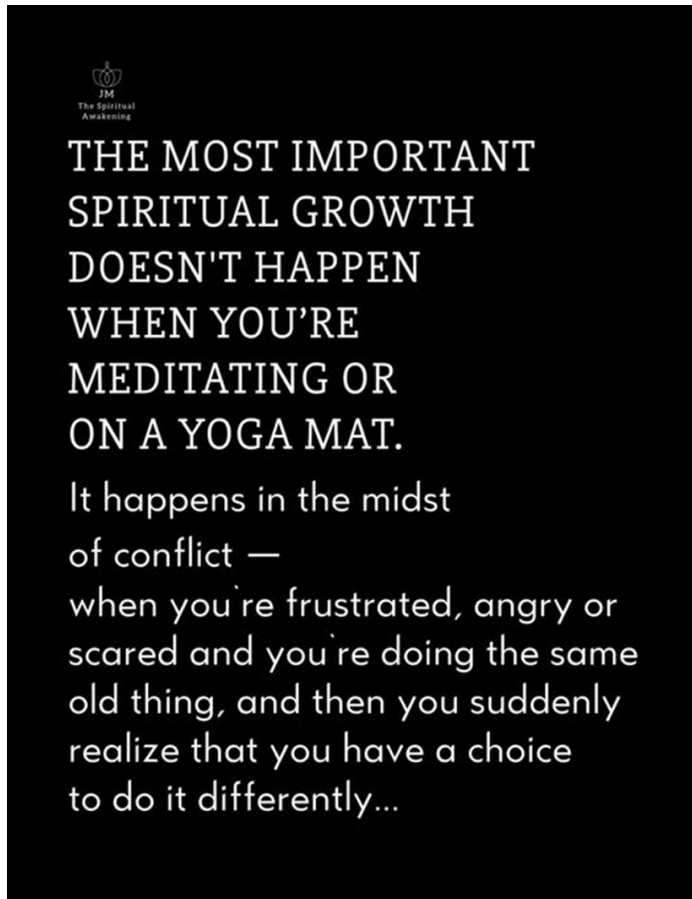
My life story is a testimony that good things can happen even when one’s fate is hard and one’s future seems bleak. There is always meaning, hope and a sense of significance when we align our efforts and abilities with divine purpose and grace.

I would like to be remembered that my work is to bring happiness and meaning to the suffering masses through my research and psychotherapy. This thought alone is able to sustain me in my darkest hours.



The concept of meaning indeed plays an important role in trauma and its treatment (Janoff-Bulman, 2006, 1992/2010) as well as post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012). Existential positive psychology (PP2.0) considers the meaning of suffering important in all circumstances and all seasons of life.

A sense of meaning represents a ray of hope in darkness, as well as a dark shadow in the bright day light; thus, it enables us to achieve some sense of balance and harmony, which are signs of mature happiness (Wong & Bower, 2018). Thus, meaning can transform suffering into deep joy if you always remember that you have the responsibility and innate capacity to respond to suffering creatively and purposively. Then, you will grow better and stronger rather than bitter and more resentful.



The Meaning of Love and Multiculturalism

In recent years, woke culture, originally intended to reduce social injustice and enhance racial equality and inclusiveness, has become a lightning rod for racial/cultural divide.

An alternative approach advocated by Frankl and me is that love is the answer to racial/cultural conflicts. The following quote from Frankl indicates that he understood the pain caused by social injustice because, as a Jewish minority, he was familiar with racial discrimination and anti-Semitism. His fight against collective guilt after World War II reflects his forgiveness towards the perpetrators and his willingness to embrace even his enemies (see the [following video from Frankl](#)).

I have also written widely on racial discrimination (Wong, 2020a) and the need to love our enemies and those who are different from us (e.g., Wong, 2003). More recently, Wong and Mayer (2023) wrote:

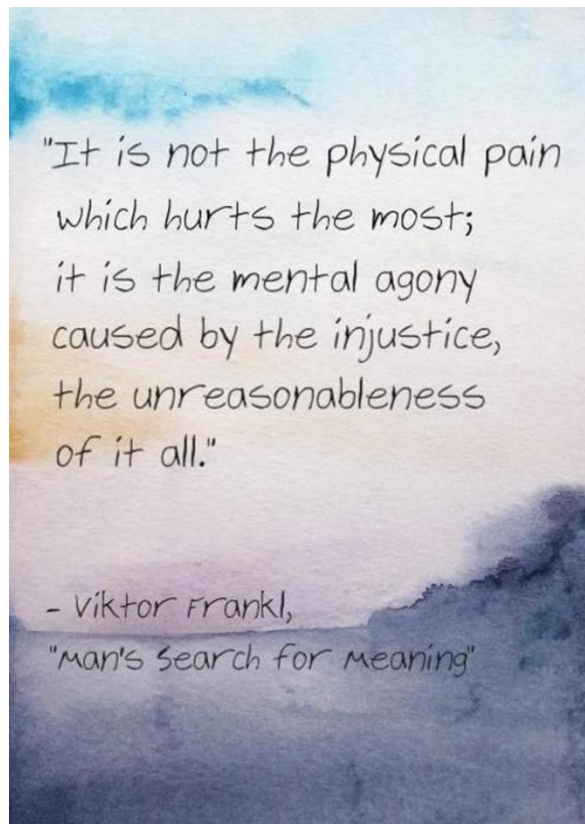
“We can make life better for all by remembering these two important lessons:

1. Together with faith and hope, love is essential for mental health. We need to have the discipline to cultivate love and compassion. ‘True love doesn’t happen right away; it’s an ever-growing process. It develops after you’ve gone through many ups and downs, when you’ve suffered together, cried together, laughed together,’ says Ricardo Montalban.

2. Suffering is an inevitable aspect of true love. Trying to avoid or get rid of suffering would be tantamount to getting rid of love itself, ‘because it always demands an element of self-sacrifice, because, given temperamental differences and the drama of situations, it will always bring with it renunciation and pain.’ (Pope Benedict XVI, 2022)”

True love is always expansive. The love cycle is an upward spiritual (see the following figure).

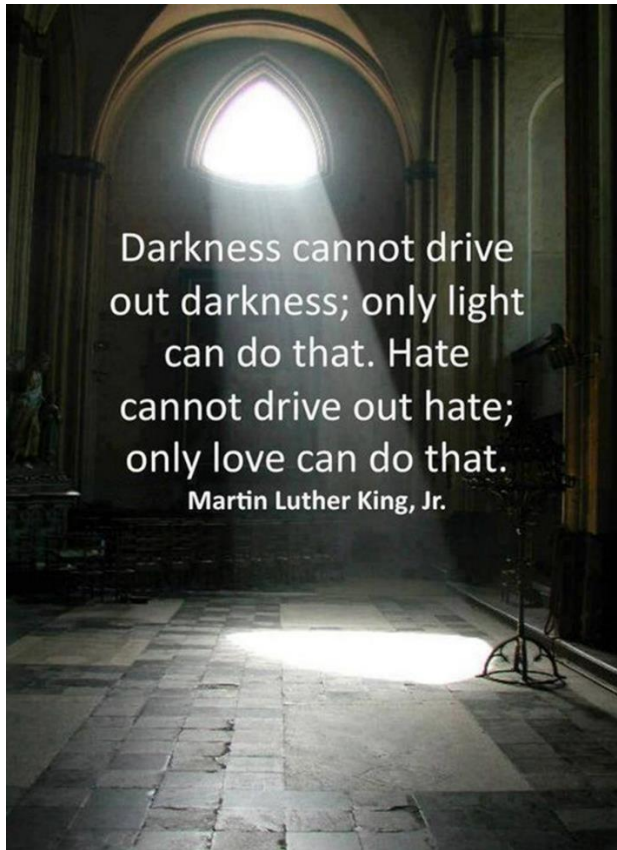
Hate can never drive away the darkness of social injustice and discrimination. Mandatory quotas and Woke policies can never drive away inequality and racism. The world does not need more hate from both the Left and the Right; the world needs more love. Only love can heal old wounds and bridge racial and cultural divides. This is meaningful multiculturalism based in universal human rights and agape love for all.



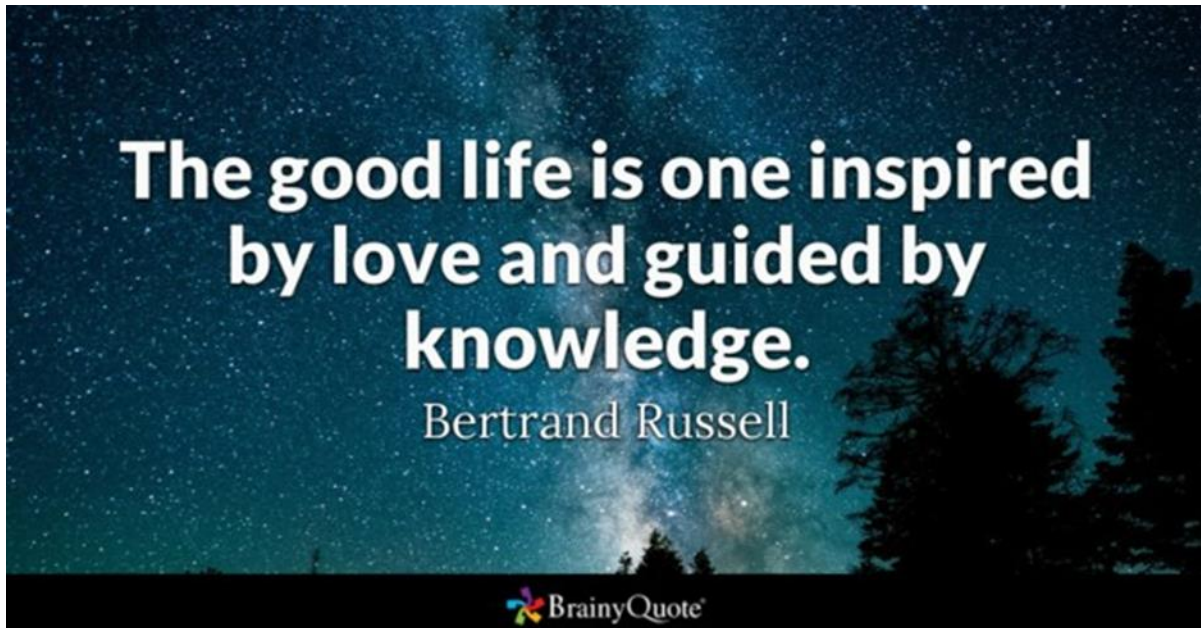
THE UPWARD SPIRAL OF LOVE

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong






Therefore, we can extend Bertrand Russell's statement that the world can become a better place for all people if it is one inspired and guided by love.



We can conclude this section with an optimistic view that suffering can make us stronger and better. Even mental illness cannot prevent us from living the best possible life of sustainable flourishing. This new view is symbolized by the tree of life as depicted in the following figure.



The new science of flourishing through suffering consists of the dialectical process of (a) sinking one's roots to the deepest parts of hell through level of processing, and (b) spreading one's branches to the highest parts of Heaven and the broadest parts of earth through self-transcendence.

This is the less travelled road to finding joy and peace on earth through the vertical dimension of human existence of reaching downward to face and transform suffering, and reaching upward through self-transcendence and connections with the highest ideals of faith, hope, and love.

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell."
—C.G. Jung

What Can We Do About Mental Illness?

How can we keep people sane in an insane world? How can we maintain human decency and dignity in a world where people treat each other as instruments with deception and manipulation for personal gains? How can we help people survive and thrive in a cruel and unpredictable world?

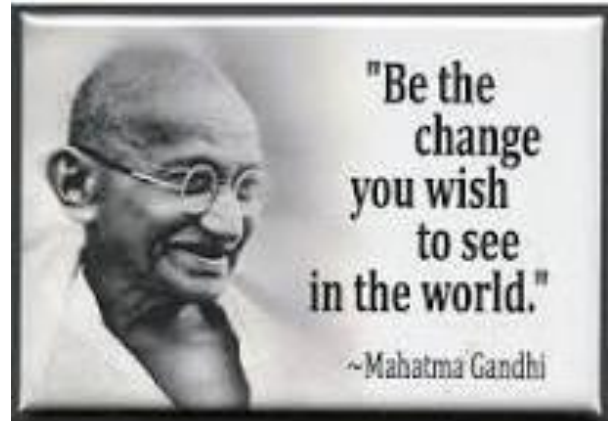
In simplest terms, it begins with us. Let's improve ourselves. Let's replace our own cynical and critical attitudes towards others with a more caring and positive attitude. Let's deal with our own demons first. Has it ever dawned on you that all the human evils in our society began with the evil within each one of us? As long as we deny this hard truth, we will continue to attack each other.

In [a recent interview with Bitu Bardi](#), I have proposed the following 10 steps for healing and flourishing according to Frankl:

- 1) Once we have the existential courage to face the dark side of life, this would be the first step towards starting a new chapter in our lives. Nietzsche called it the will to power; Frankl called it the defiant power of the human spirit. But I simply call it *existential courage* – the courage to be true to who you truly are, the courage to remain true to your calling, and the courage to pursue your dream of living a meaningful and fulfilling life.
- 2) To assume responsibility for one's own future means to stop blaming others and complaining; it means to start reflecting on one's life, seeking God's guidance, and trying to figure out a way to move forward. Even before finding your life goal, you can always practice the basic rules of being a decent human being by valuing each day, doing your best in whatever you do, and being kind of others.

In sum, you will practice the basic rules of living the good life each day:

- a. DO WHAT IS GOOD, according to your conscience, moral knowledge, and practical wisdom.
 - b. BE A GOOD PERSON, according to normative standards of being virtuous.
 - c. PURSUE A GOOD PURPOSE, according to the best end goods for self and others.
- 3) The third thing I have learned is the need for self-acceptance and self-compassion. Stop



"Attack the evil that is within yourself, rather than attacking the evil that is in others."

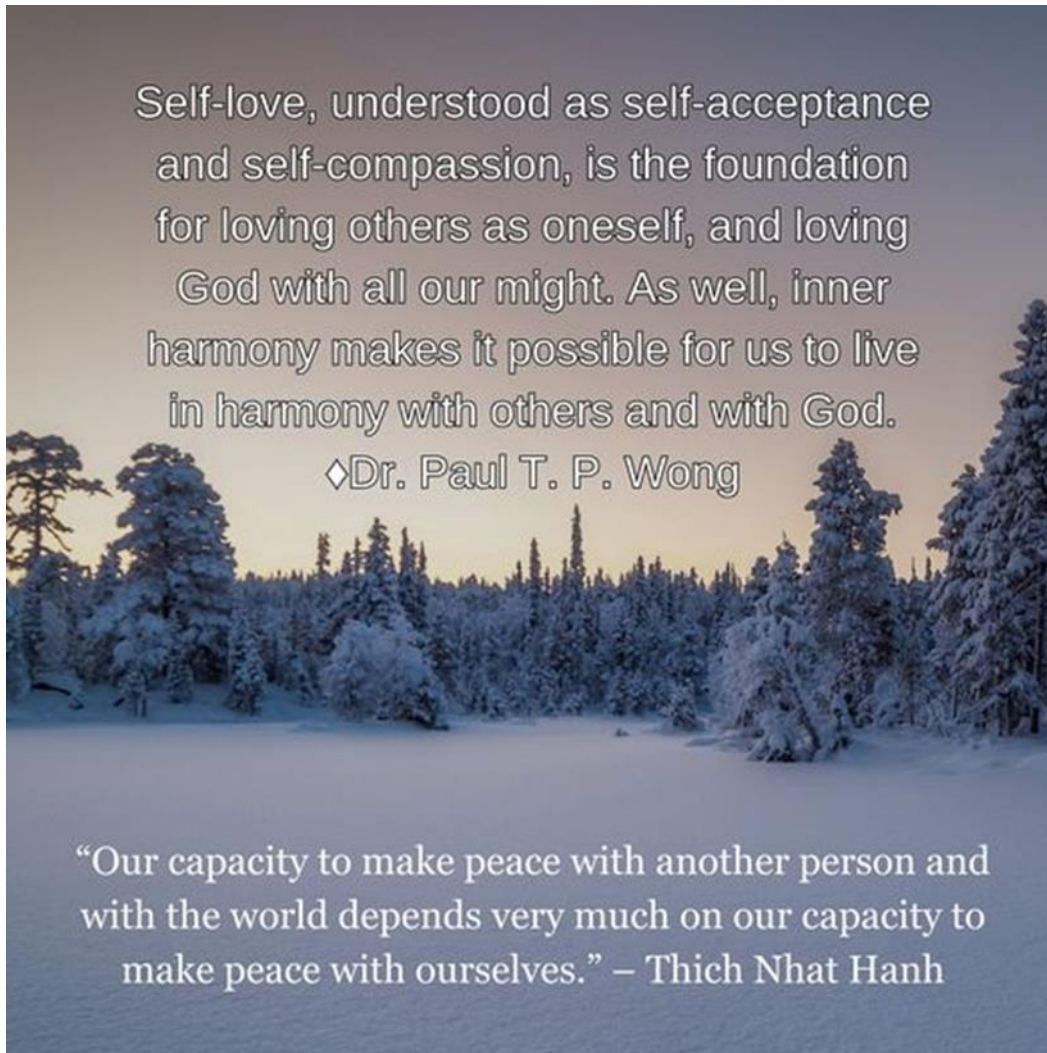
-Confucius



Today will Never
come again. Be a
blessing. Be a friend.
Encourage someone.
Take time to care.
Let your words heal,
and not wound.

bla-ming yourself for your misfortunes. When people don't seem to like me, I often ask myself if I have done something wrong. Carl Jung taught me that it may be something wrong with them – something in you that irritates them. Neff (2015) focuses on *self-compassion* as way of preventing ourselves from experiencing unnecessary problems.

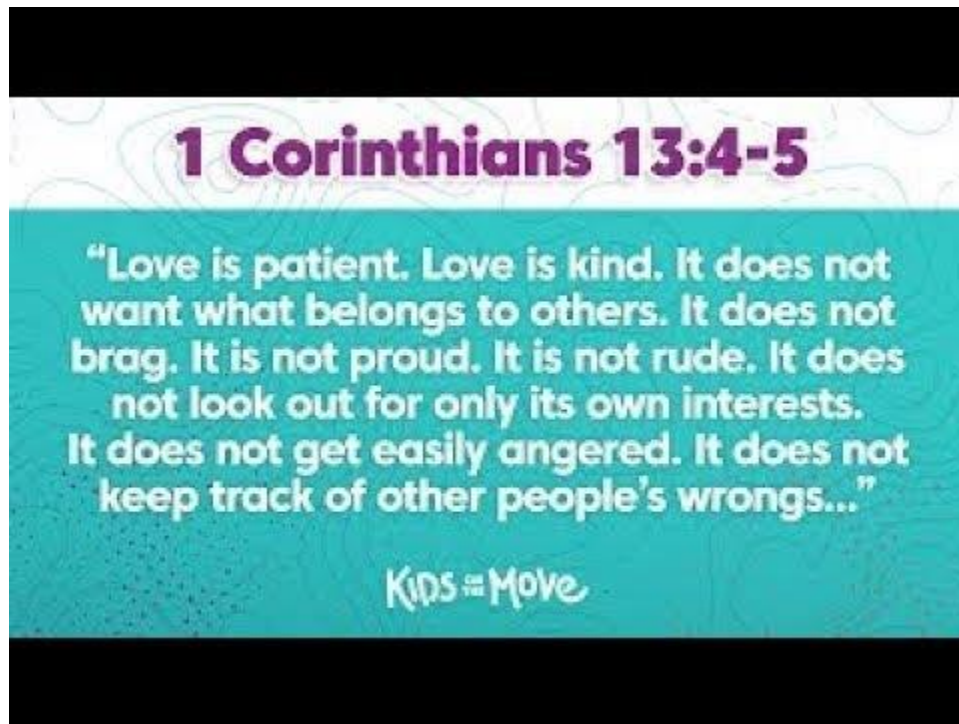
Many people suffer because they cannot accept themselves; more precisely, they cannot accept the undesirable part of themselves – whether it is their body image, some feature of their face, or some ugly aspects of their past (e.g., a history of mental illness, attempted suicide, or mistreating their loved ones). The solution is self acceptance and self-compassion – finding enough love and space in one's hearts to be forgiving and kind to oneself.



- 4) The fourth step is love for our neighbours and love for God. Love is the motivation and love never ceases (1 Corinthians 13). Love makes all things beautiful.

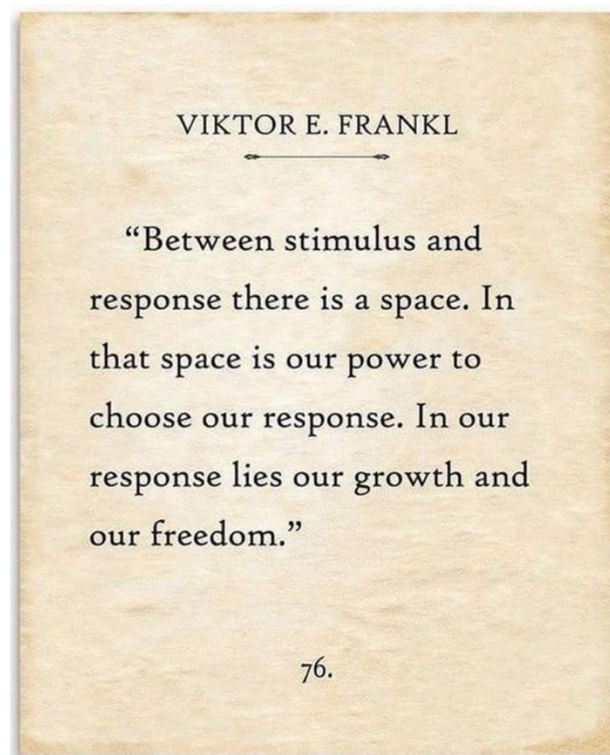
Loving oneself is the foundation for loving others and loving God as we have seen how the spiral of love cycles. Inner harmony makes it possible for us to live in harmony with others and with God. If we cannot love ourselves, because we have never experienced love or don't know how to love, we can seek divine help because God is love – God is the source of all love.

In Abrahamic religious, we know that God showed his love for us by sacrificing his own son for our sins and redemption. We need to learn to sacrifice our pride, hatred, resentment, and self-righteousness in order to love our enemies or love the unlovable.



- 5) We have already discussed at length that meaning is the essence of human experience and the core of human nature – we are the only meaning seeking and meaning making creatures. Meaning is in our DNA because it is something that enabled us to survive unimaginable hardships throughout million of years. It also enables us to seek and discover our authentic self and our true identity as a spiritual being.

Meaning makes all things beautiful and all bad things bearable. That is why we need to cultivate a meaning mindset (Wong, 2012) – to discover something good, meaningful, or beneficial in every situation. Frankl points out that we always have the freedom to respond the right way if we follow the 3 second-rule of pausing between stimulus and response (Wong, 2020b):



- a. What is happening? – The orienting reflex or mindful meditation.
 - b. What is the meaning of this situation? – Meaning mindset.
 - c. What is the responsible thing to do? – Personal and social responsibility.
- 6) Frankl prefers the term *self-transcendence* rather than meaning because self-transcendence includes both the horizontal and vertical dimensions. More importantly, self-transcendence represents deep meaning, which demands that our ego, like a seed, needs to be buried and to be dead in order to grow into a tall tree with deep roots.

A true self-transcendent life is characterized by the absence of selfish ambitions and the presence of a humble servant's heart. It is also evident in transcending our vulnerabilities and transforming suffering into blessing. For example, when you feel sad or depressed, instead of feeling sorry for yourself and licking your own wounds, you can turn it into blessing by helping someone less fortunate than yourself.

This is exactly what I did as a young Christian that was struggling with poverty and personal problems. "How can I share my faith with others, when I am still feeling so weak and troubled?" I asked myself. But when I decided to walk by faith rather than by feelings, when I started visiting hospital, slums and talking to the homeless, my sadness was replaced by God's blessings and faith was strengthened by exercising it. That is why I often challenge my clients or young Christians to serve and care for others as a way to overcome their own miseries. Life is full of paradoxes throughout the different stages of development; these paradoxes can be resolved through self-transcendence (Wong & Worth, 2017).

When you feel down,
go be a blessing
to someone else.

- 7) Self-transcendence and dialectics go together like two sides of the same coin, according to Frankl's concept of self-transcendence. We are living in a world where good and evil, belief and doubt, hope and fear co-exist. It is difficult to resolve dualities with the binary either-or mentality. But we can achieve non-duality and unity through a dialectic mindset and self-transcendence. We cannot understand or apply Frankl's logotherapy without embracing his dialectic mindset. Here is a quote about Frankl's dialectical thinking at a fundamental level (Wong, 2021a):

“Frankl’s dialectical and paradoxical self-transcendence model reminds us of Taoism.

In a nutshell, his self-transcendence model of mental health has two parts. First, his optimistic worldview in human potential (responsible freedom, the will to meaning, and the intrinsic meaning of life) that transcends his tragic worldview of life (death, pain, and guilt); this mixture of positive and negative beliefs results in the invincible *Tragic Optimism*, which enables us to dream the impossible dreams (Frankl, 1946/1985; Leung et al., 2021). His central concept, “the will to meaning,” is a spiritual act of volition to direct one’s life toward a transcendental goal in order to rise above the evitable suffering and death (Frankl, 1988).

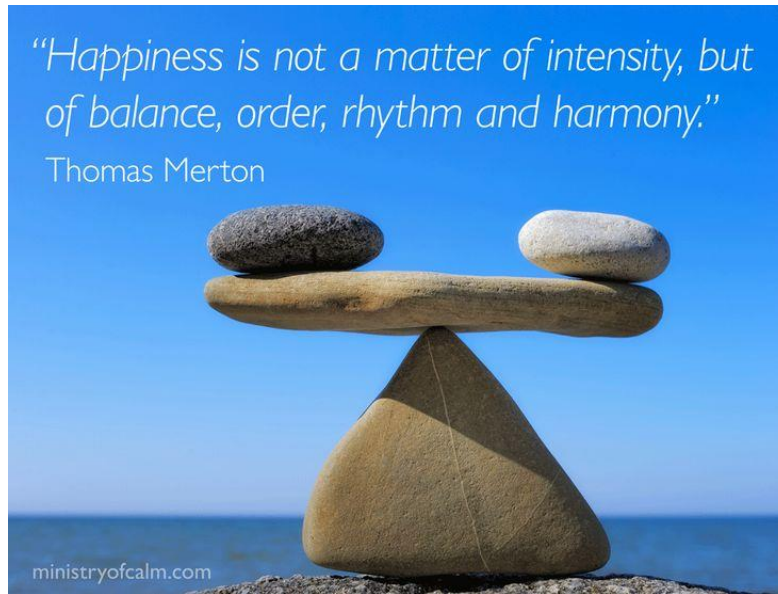
Second, his meaning triad (creative, experiential, and attitudinal values) transcends the neurotic triad (aggression, addiction, and depression), resulting in meaningful living in spite of the potential for mental illness in a cruel and meaningless world. In other words, it is impossible to have meaning and happiness without death and suffering just as we cannot have light without darkness. Thus, his Yin-Yang framework of self-transcendence is the key to mental health and flourishing (Wong, 2021b).”

His entire theory and therapy are building around dialectic Yin-Yang interactions in order to achieve a dynamic adaptive balance; it necessarily involves both inner tension and harmony. I have expanded on this thought more recently (Wong & Cowden, 2022).

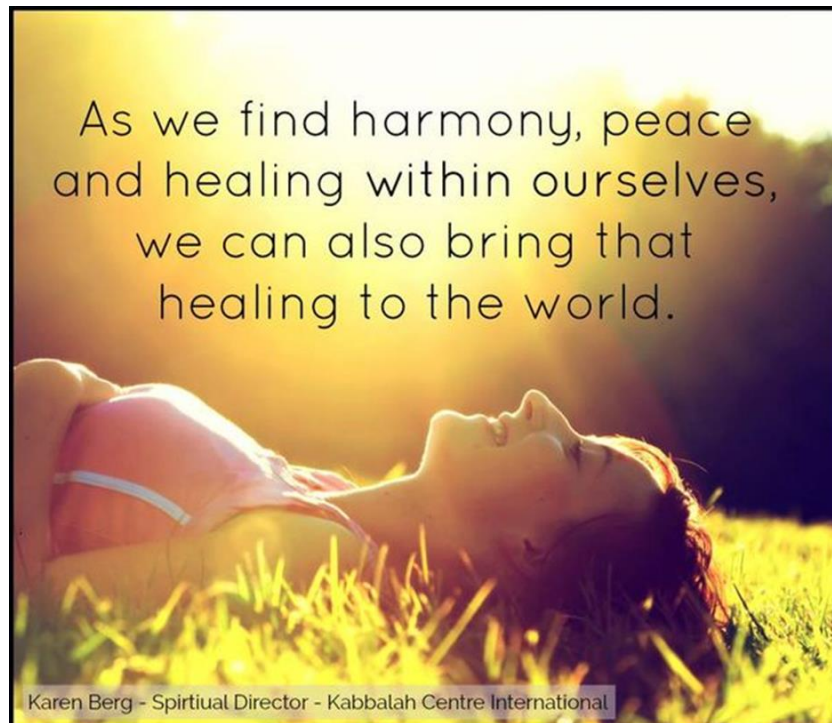
- 8) Frankl’s teaching on resilience was shaped by life experience in Nazi concentration camps; it explains why so many Holocaust survivors became resilient individuals rather than mentally ill (Sabater, 2021; Wong, 2020). Frankl emphasizes the need to change oneself with a defiant attitude to overcome and discover the meaning of suffering, resulting in becoming a better and more resilient individual. For more evidence on meaning centered approach to resilience, please read Wong and Wong (2012). The resilient mindset (Arslan & Wong, 2023) can be considered the ultimate growth mindset – the capacity to grow personally and spiritually through overcoming hardships and misfortunes. Frankl’s own biography is a prototype of the resilient mindset (Krasovska & Mayer, 2021).
- 9) *Tragic optimism* an important component of the resilient mindset; it is based on faith, hope and self-transcendence in hopeless circumstances (Leung, 2019; Wong, 2009). Recently, tragic optimism in coping with very stressful situations has attracted a lot of public interest because of its power to enable people to bounce back and rekindle their hope for growth (Kaufman, 2021; Stulberg, n.d.).

In clinical settling, we need to help patients restore their hope by believing that they can discover new meaning for their broken lives and that some progress is attainable if they are committed to the process of therapy. We also need to help them understand that they have a spiritual core which cannot be injured by mental illness. It is important to awaken their defiant human spirit and to help them keep faith that life is still worth living and has inherent value and dignity even for suffering people (*Homo patiens*). In fact, to believe that life is worth living may be the best protection against suicide (Soper, 2020). Frankl’s success in reducing suicide through meaning has been confirmed by empirical research (Constanza et al., 2019).

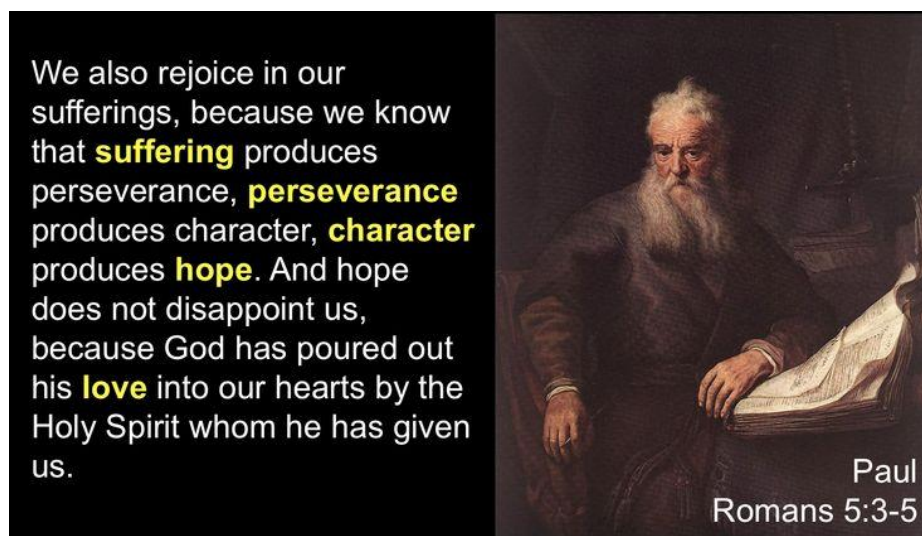
- 10) We finally reach the crescendo of Frankl's teachings, which calls the world to consider an alternative approach to mental health and global flourishing. To use a different metaphor, Frankl has weaved different threads with contrasting colours into a beautiful tapestry with love at the center. It can also be described as a tapestry based on a dynamic balance between opposites and harmony among competing values.



Thomas Merton shares Frankl's dialectic view: "Hence the paradox that unselfish love cannot rest perfectly except in a love that is perfectly reciprocated: because it knows that the only true peace is found in selfless love." (Read Merton, 1955/2002)



We can also consider the experience of Apostle Paul. When he was in jail waiting for execution, he was able to write: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippines 4:4). I have coined the term “chaironic happiness” (Wong, 2011, 2016) and mature happiness (Wong & Bowers, 2018). Romans 5:3-5 provides a full description of this kind of faith-based and meaning-centered happiness.



What kind of wellbeing will recapitulate all of Frankl’s teachings and all the above examples of grace under pressure or peace in the storm? Perhaps, it can be called *existential wellbeing* because it is the unique kind of wellbeing and flourishing within the context of a harsh and brutal world. I have written about this kind of wellbeing in my successful aging research, which shows that many seniors still enjoy their lives in spite of chronic illness or handicap (Wong, 1989). I have also found evidence for it in my resilience research (Wong & Worth, 2017). My latest research also allows for possibility of sustainable flourishing even with suffering or mental illness (Wong & Laird, 2023). What an uplifting vision for those suffering from mental illness!

Conclusion

This chapter has covered all three aspects of mental illness – how to prevent mental illness, how to heal mental illness, and how to promote wellness. Any comprehensive approach to improve mental health needs to address all three objectives.

Prevention starts with me, with every person willing to make positive changes to prevent mental illness. It can begin with taking care of our physical health, repenting of our past mistakes, and developing new attitude of kindness, forgiveness, and justice. It is never too late to change. Even a criminal hanged beside Jesus can be redeemed in the last minute through repentance and faith (Luke 23:42).

Spiritual awakening is both a turning point and a process. Many things can trigger an awakening – a tragedy, a sermon, or a



time of reflection all have the potential to make us realize that there is more to life than everyday busyness and striving for money or fame.

Once we are awakened to our true purpose of life, we can become what we are meant to be. The best possible life is a meaningful life motivated by love for people and guided by virtues, knowledge, and wisdom, resulting in happiness.

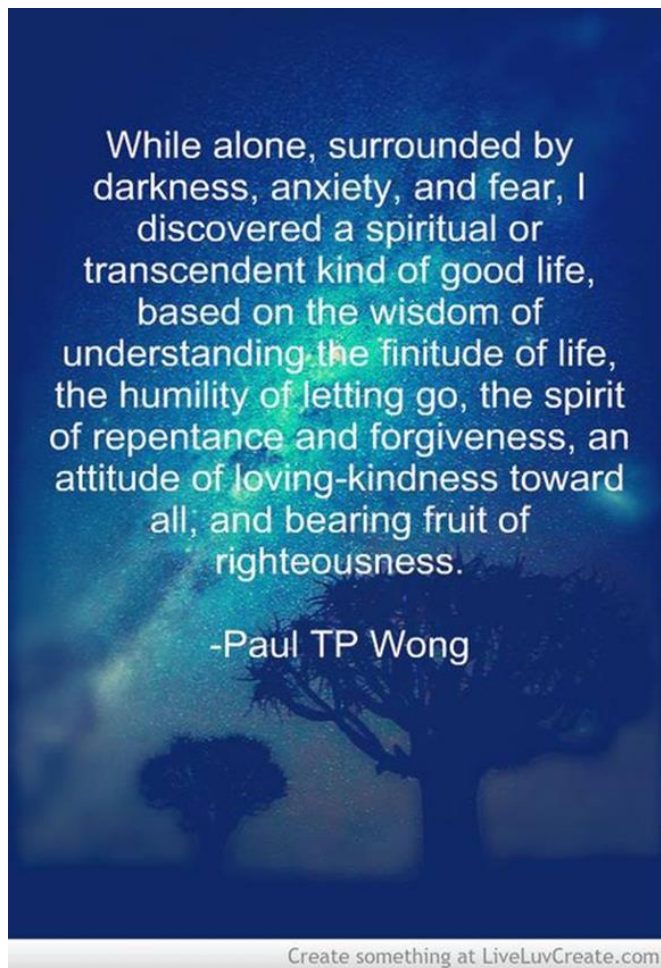
Here is a fitting quote from Frankl: "Live as though you're living a second time and as though the first time you lived, you did it wrong, and now you're trying to do things right."

This lesson attempts to answer some common and urgent existential questions, such as "How can I find meaning in times of suffering?" and "How can we embrace suffering in order to become one's best?"

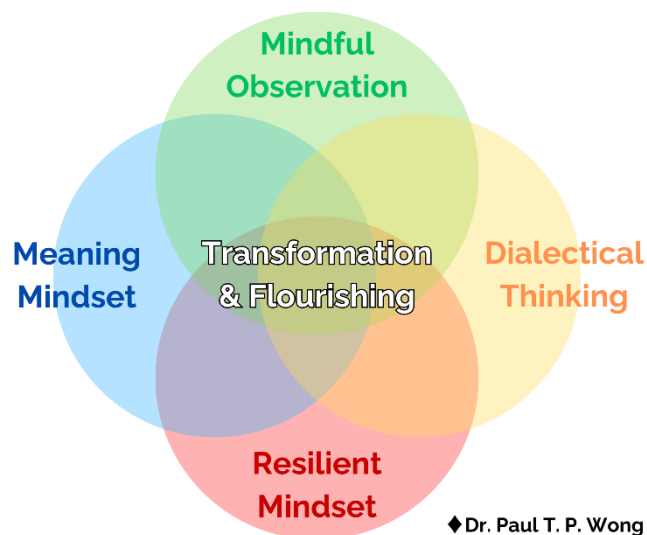
The quote on the right is my personal testimony. You too can find healing and existential wellbeing through faith and meaning transformation.

I want to conclude this chapter by stating that a meaning-centered approach to mental health is based on the three cornerstones of meaningful living, meaningful suffering, and meaningful multiculturalism, which enable us to grow spiritually and enjoy existential wellbeing. This is not an easy journey with its ups and downs, twists and turns. At times, we need to traverse deep and dark valleys. What keeps us going are the four mental disciplines or mindsets which enable us to see the world as it is (see the figure on the right).

The ten important steps for transforming suffering into flourishing are summarized in the figure on the next page.



FOUR MENTAL DISCIPLINES FOR HEALING AND FLOURISHING



Here are the 10 Steps to Achieve Mental Health and Human Flourishing

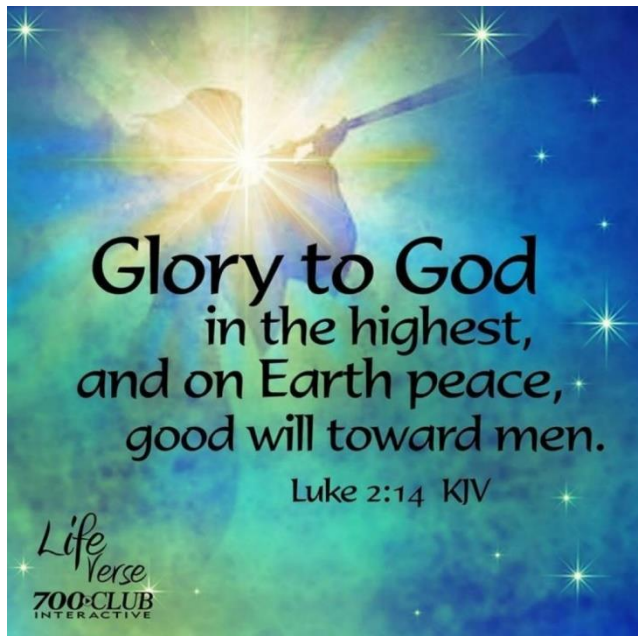
1. Have the courage to become who you truly are.
2. Assume responsibility for your own future.
3. Become aware of your need for change and for self-compassion.
4. Love your neighbours as your self and love God.
5. Discover the meaning of life and meaning of suffering.
6. Pursue self-transcendence with all its depths, heights, and breaths.
7. Navigate an adaptive balance through Yin-Yang dialectics.
8. Cultivate the resilient mindset to grow in adversity.
9. Develop tragic optimism based on faith, hope and love.
10. Enjoy existential wellbeing based on a holistic view of personhood.

♦Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

“The quest for meaning is the key to mental health and human flourishing.”

– Viktor E. Frankl

Here is my Christmas greeting to you all: May you become your best in the coming new year. Meanwhile, feel free to ask me questions regarding the course so that you can fully benefit from it.



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