

President's Column: Is Existential Wellbeing the Key to Positive Mental Health?

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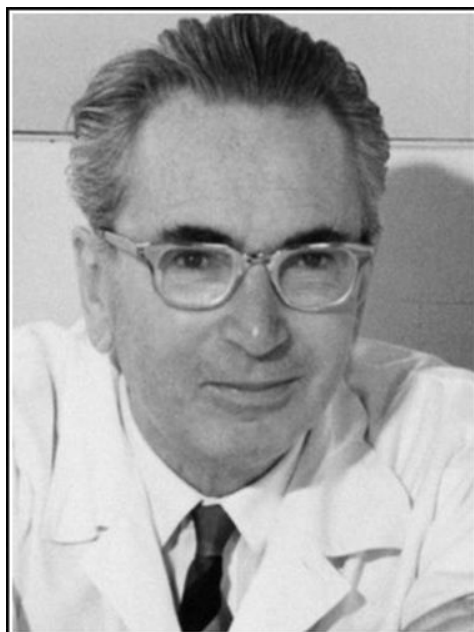
I don't want to bore you with all the current statistics about our mental health crisis. You already know that the prevalence rates of depression, drug overdoses, and suicide among young people. The challenge before us is how to solve the mental health crisis without solely depending on the medical model (Wong & Laird, 2023). We need to consider other alternatives such as a holistic community-based approach.

As a clinical psychologist, I have learned from my clients that most of them have succeeded by any objective standard and enjoy good physical health. Yet, they feel so they miserable and stressed out to the point of seeking professional help. "With all my success, why do I still feel unfulfilled, frustrated, and disappointed?" "Why do I have problems with my spouse?" "What is the point of all the struggle?" "What is the meaning of life?" "Is there any solution to my problems?" These are of the common questions raised by my clients.

No wonder many young people have become very cynical about the traditional formula for a good life – good education, good job, and a happy marriage. That have witnessed the futility of the traditional path to success and happiness in their parents, yet they do not know any alternative life purpose.

In this essay, I want to unpack the meaning of existential wellbeing as the key to positive mental health and global flourishing.

Meaning is the Answer According to Viktor Frankl



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.

— Viktor E. Frankl —

AZ QUOTES

Viktor Frankl discovered many years ago that "ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for." And he correctly pointed out that neither pleasure nor power can satisfy the human soul, which cries out for meaning. The genius of Viktor Frankl is not his

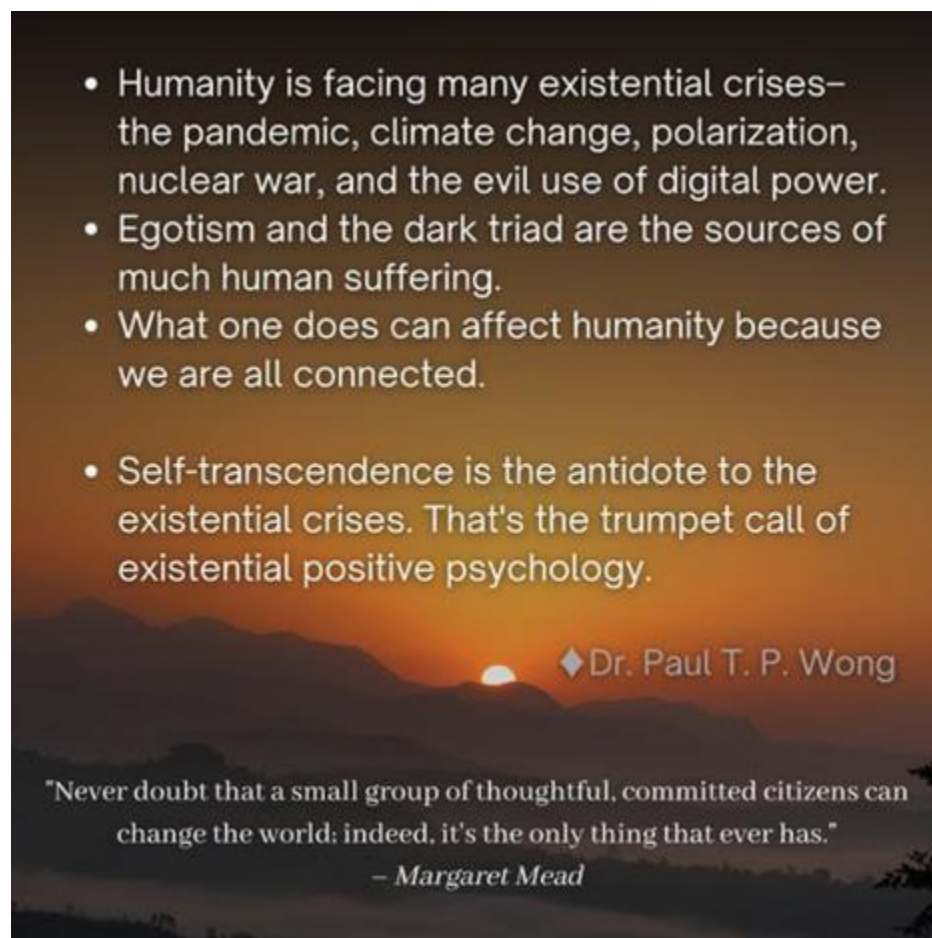
discovery of the importance of meaning, but his profound understanding of meaning in life in terms of self-transcendence, as explained in the above quote from Frankl.

We need self-transcendence, because we need to transcend our ego, the main source of inner torments, because of all its unfulfilled pride, insecurities, and insoluble conflicts. In addition, we all need self-transcendence in order to pursue something greater than ourselves and connect with the Ultimate Meaning and others.

According to Frankl, all mental illnesses can be attributed to one general factor – a sick soul from living a meaningless life; therefore, the key to mental health and flourishing is to live a meaningful life defined as the self-transcendental way of life. I have expanded Frankl's concept of self-transcendence into the new paradigm of existential positive psychology (See Figure 1; Wong, Mayer et al., 2021; Wong, Cowden et al., 2022).

Figure 1

The New Paradigm of Existential Positive Psychology



How to Turn Suffering into Flourishing

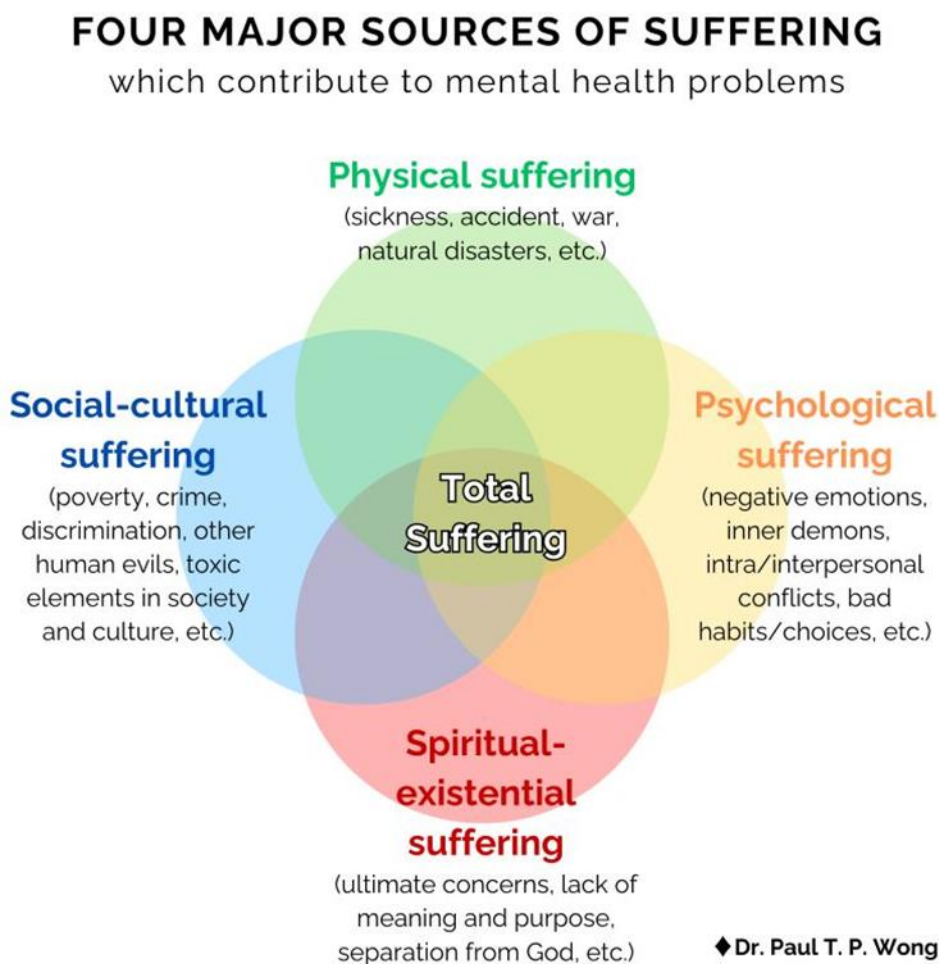
My new paradigm for happiness and flourishing is to accept the baseline of suffering and transform it into flourishing. Here is a step-by-step guide towards positive mental health in spite of all your problems:

The First Step Is To Accept And Embrace Suffering As An Inevitable Part Of Life

Figure 2 shows that our suffering can come from any combination of the four major sources of suffering. Most people are not even aware of their spiritual-existential suffering because they are so preoccupied with the material world that they do not spend time to cultivate the spiritual or transcendental values of faith, hope, and love (Wong, 2023a).

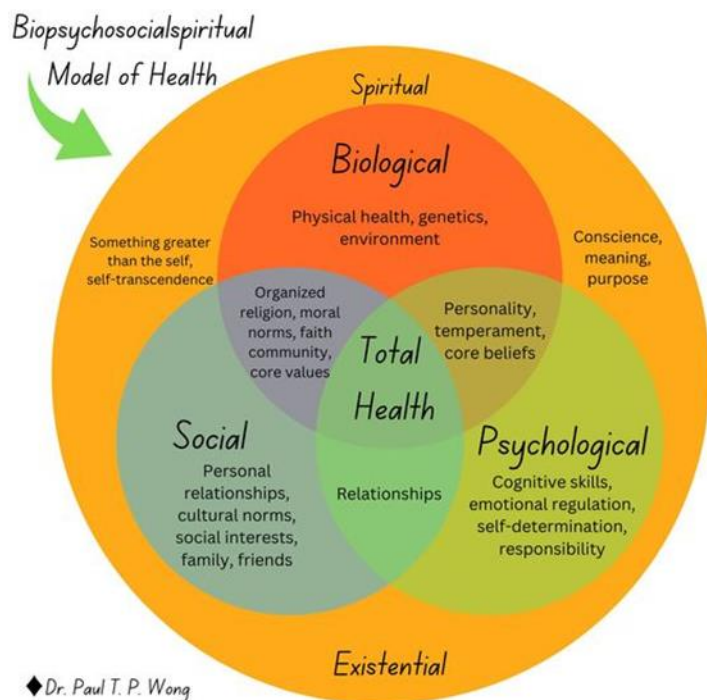
Figure 2

Four Major Sources of Suffering



From a holistic framework, the inevitable result of ignoring our ultimate concerns for meaning and connection is a sense of emptiness, boredom, and loneliness, which cannot be fulfilled by pleasures, and worldly success, as my clients have demonstrated.

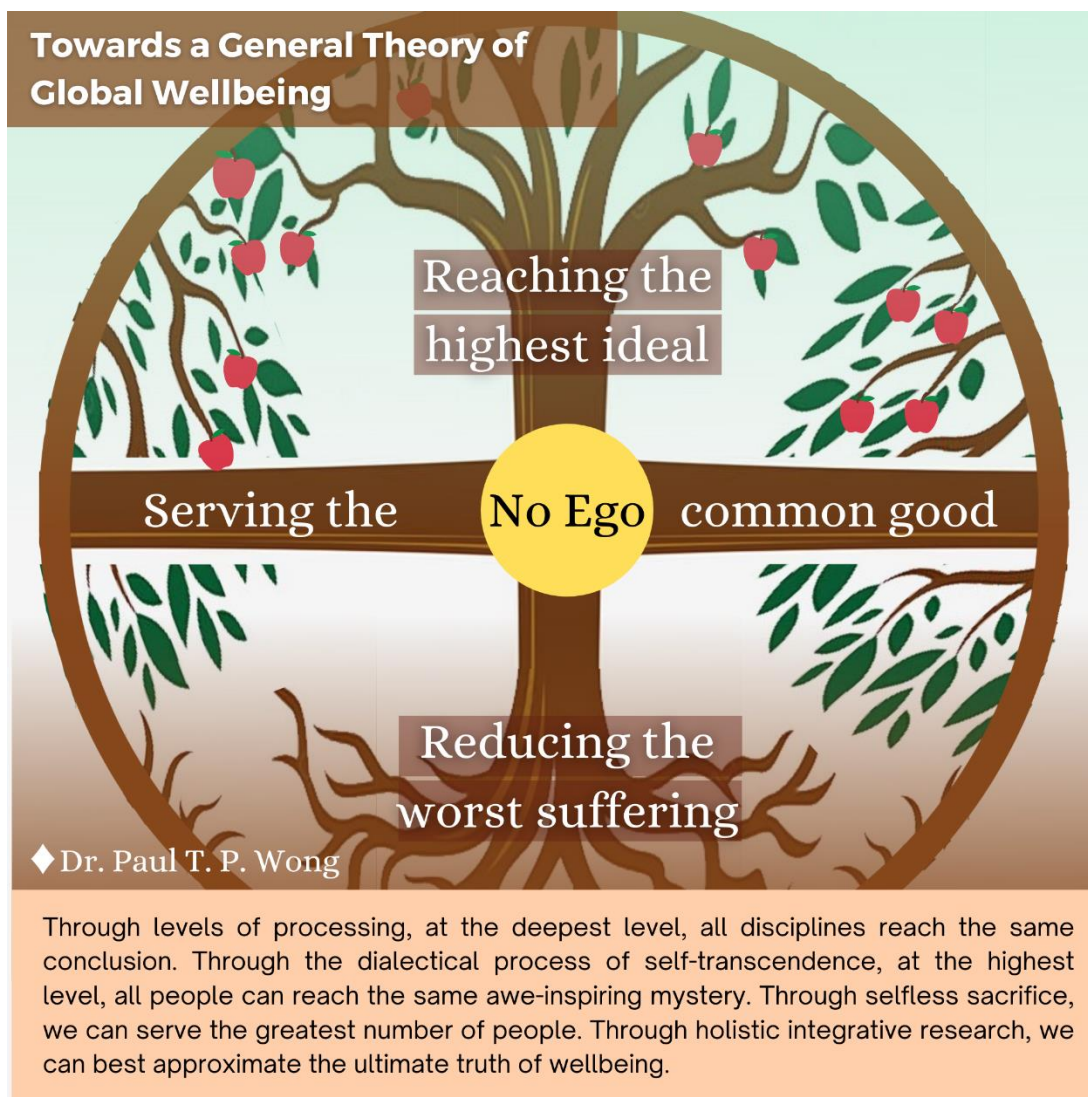
That is why the spiritual-existential dimension is the most important dimension for our total health or quality-of-life as shown in Figure 3. The spiritual-existential dimension actually permeates every aspects of our life because we are basically spiritual beings with the breath of God in us. That is why we can never find meaning and fulfillment when this dimension is neglected, even when we have satisfied all the needs of the other three dimensions.

Figure 3*The Bio-psycho-social-spiritual Model of Health***The Second Step Is To Endure Suffering And Make It The Foundation For Flourishing**

Yes, endurance. If you really accept suffering as the baseline of life, it logically follows that you need to learn how to endure suffering, no matter how painful.

I have already published a lot on the new science of enduring and transforming suffering (Wong, 2023a; Wong & Worth, 2017; Wong, Ho et al., 2023). It will take a book to document all the empirical evidence and real life examples of the importance of endurance. Without enduring the long dark night, you will not see the new dawn. Similarly, without endurance of suffering, you cannot flourish as demonstrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4*Towards a General Theory of Global Wellbeing*



The Third Step Is To Understand The Meaning Of Suffering And Achieve Existential Wellbeing As The Foundation For Mental Health And Flourishing

According to my suffering hypothesis (Wong, 2023b; Wong & Laird, in press), sinking one's roots deep into the soil of suffering is necessary for flourishing. It will involve existential intelligence, self-transcendence, and the virtues of courage, patience, and faith in order to flourish and experience existential wellbeing even in the worst of circumstances.

What Is Existential Wellbeing? What Does It Look Like?

I want to conclude this little adventure into the wonderland of existential positive psychology by describing existential wellbeing in a way that my readers can readily relate to.

In simple terms, existential wellbeing (EWB) means the ability to live well and die well in spite of pain, obstacles, and impending death. Generally a person is enjoying a sense of EWB when one has gone through adversity and has learned (a) the meaning of suffering, (b) the existential

wisdom concerning the big picture and long-term benefits, (c) the need and skills to relate to others at a deeper level, (d) the need and benefits of connecting with God or a Higher power, and (e) the wisdom of dialectically navigating opposite forces and achieving balance and harmony. Figure 5 shows some of the indicators or correlates of existential wellbeing.

Figure 5

Indicators of Existential Wellbeing



In our latest invited article on existential wellbeing for the journal *Medicina* (Wong et al., in preparation), we emphasize that existential wellbeing (EWB) is the most important kind of wellbeing for people suffering from various diseases, especially for patients in palliative or hospice care (Wong & Yu, 2021). We propose that this type of wellbeing involves some combination of the following experiences:

- (1) Prior experience of overcoming adversity.
- (2) Some level of existential intelligence (Gardner, 2020) in solving one's existential concerns, such as meaninglessness and fear of death.

- (3) Some level of spiritual wellbeing based on transcendental values of faith, hope, and love (Wong, 2023a).
- (4) Some wisdom of the soul (Wong 2022).
- (5) Some knowledge of meaning-focused coping (Eisenbeck et al., 2021).
- (6) Some knowledge and experience of self-transcendence (Reed & Haugan, 2021; Wong, Arslan et al., 2021).

The discovery of EWB provides new ground of hope for mental health without total dependence on the medical model, and it is based on the new science of suffering (Wong, Ho et al., 2022). Just imagine how it can change your attitude towards suffering and transform your life for the better when you know how to (1) redefine positivity or wellbeing in terms of seeing and being the light in the darkness, (2) navigate the dialectical process of balancing between opposites, and (3) enjoy the mature happiness (Wong & Bowers, 2018) of inner peace and harmony during turbulent times.

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