

# Viktor Frankl's Meaning Seeking Model and Positive Psychology

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# Abstract

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Viktor Frankl is already universally recognized as a towering figure in meaning-oriented therapy (logotherapy), but his contribution to wellbeing and flourishing is still not widely known. In this keynote, I first discuss Frankl's Positive Psychology of height, depth, and breadth. Next I explain why he appeals to people from different cultures and different disciplines. Here, I show that Frankl's meaning seeking model is based on his deep understanding of human nature, both at its best and at its worst. I then explore Frankl's revolutionary concept of self-transcendence as the foundation for healing and flourishing. Finally, as one recent development of Frankl's Logotherapy, I introduce my existential positive psychology and general theory of sustainable global wellbeing.

# One: Introduction

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- I am most grateful to God for sparing my life after my trip-and-fall accident a few days ago.
- I could have ended up in the hospital or dead.
- There is so much wisdom one can learn from Frankl after a momentary mis-step.



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- I am also grateful to Dr. Cynthia Wimberly and her team for inviting me.
  - This invitation is of historical significance, a symbol of the new Logotherapy spirit of healing and bridging what divides us.
  - Personally, it renews my hope that love and faith can prevail over misunderstandings, human weaknesses, and cultural differences.

*Viktor E. Frankl*

HOMO  
PATIENS

VERSUCH EINER  
PATHODIZEE

## Two: Discover the real Frankl you never knew

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What are his two most important discoveries that can transform your life?

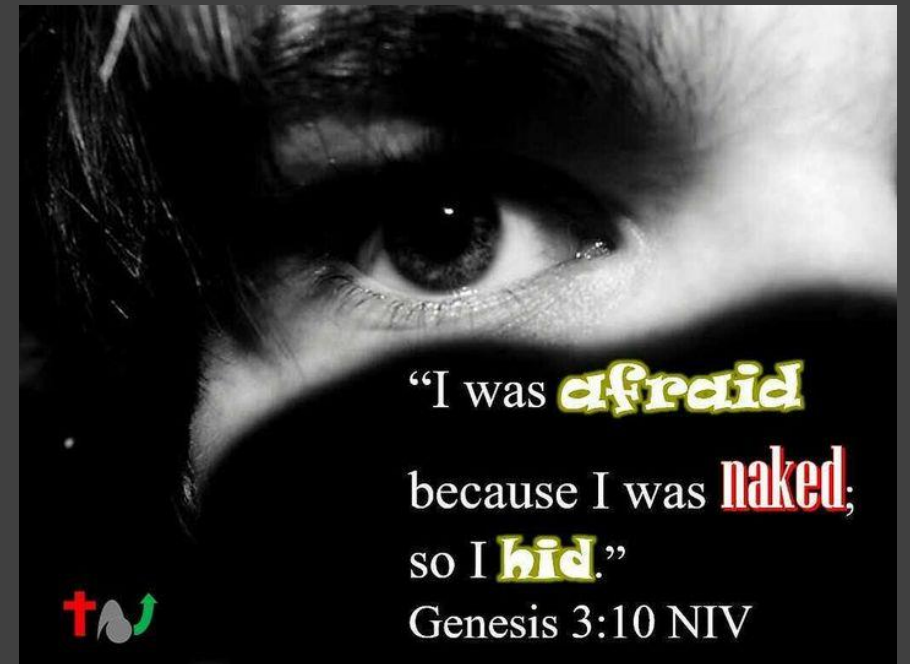
1. All our suffering and pain originate from our intellect and desire to be like God (Frankl 1971).
2. The only force or power capable of reducing our suffering and enhancing our happiness is the spiritual power of self-transcendence (Frankl 1966/1988).



# Support for Frankl's suffering hypothesis

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- This view is supported by Soper's evolution pain-brain theory of suffering and suicide (Wong, 2022).
- The connection between dangerous intelligence and psychopaths (Silverio et al., 2023).
- This view is supported by Buddhism and Biblical Christianity.





# Support for Frank's self-transcendence hypothesis

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- This view is based on the spiritual (Noetic) foundation of personhood.
- This view is supported by research (see Wong, Arslan et al., 2021).
- It represents a paradigm shift from self-actualization to self-transcendence (see Wong, Mayer et al. 2021).

# Frankl was a man of great curiosity in everything

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This trait of curiosity could account for his many exploits and adventures, including:

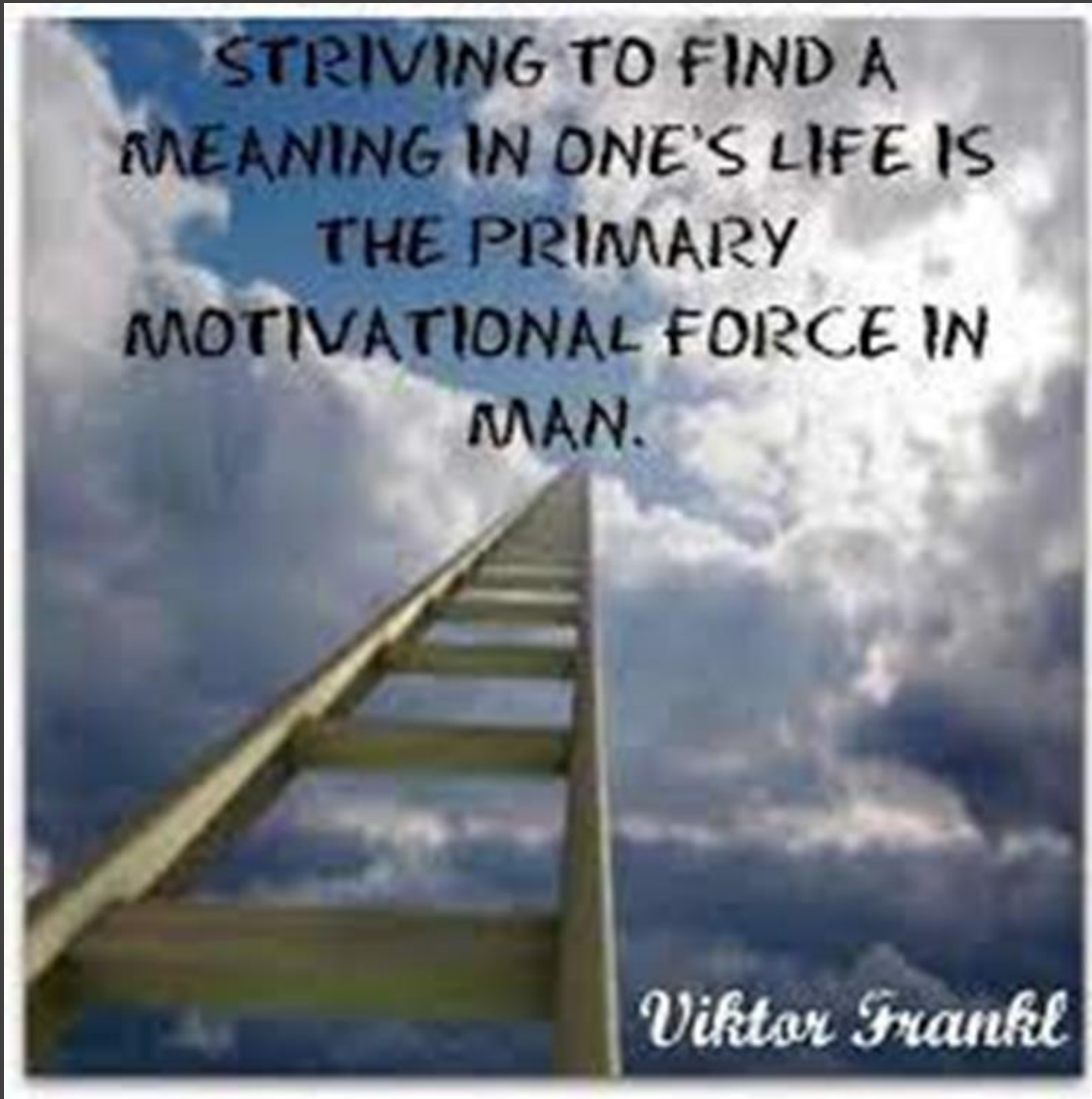
- Physical adventures of rock-climbing and flying an airplane.
- Psychological adventures in different disciplines and the new frontiers of the human mind.
- The intellectual courage of starting the 3rd Viennese School of Psychotherapy.
- The spiritual courage of exploring the transcendental reality and restoring human dignity and spiritual potentials in a secular world.
- The moral courage to save lives and doing what is right even when it means going through hell or facing criticism.

**Curiosity** is one of the most permanent and certain characteristics of a **vigorous intellect**.

— *Samuel Johnson*

AZ QUOTES





What kind of primary motivation is the human search for meaning?

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- Frankl advocates the search for meaning as a primary force in its own rights
- Search for meaning is multi-dimensional, but it mainly comes from the Noetic or Spiritual dimension of personhood.

Life can be pulled by goals  
just as surely as  
it can be pushed by drives

[Viktor Frankl]

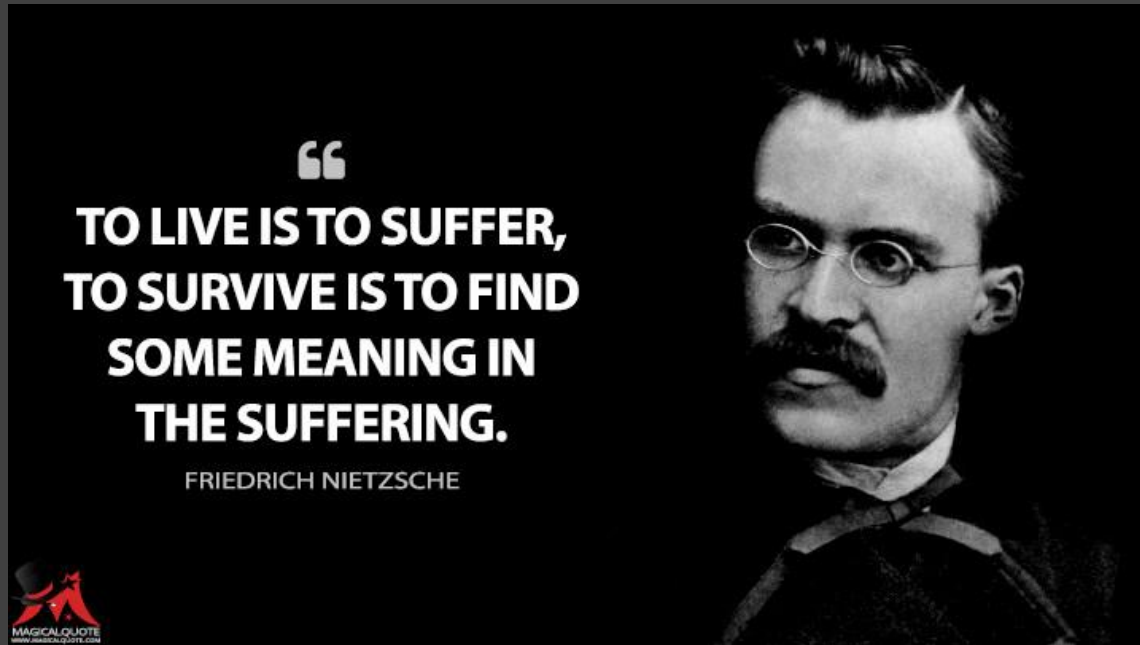
A truly remarkable man to learn from



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- Most logotherapists believe that meaning seeking can only be pulled by future goals or life purpose, but not pushed by drives.
  - But Frankl is much broader and smarter as seen in the following quote.
  - Meaning seeking can be understood as an intellectual curiosity for knowledge, and understanding the world we live, an innate need for arousal/tension, the moral demand from our conscience, or our spiritual yearning (Frankl, 1988; Wong, 1979; Wong & Laird, in press).
  - Thus, the search for meaning and purpose is both a “push” and a “pull,” which doubles the strength of the meaning search.

# The overarching framework for Frankl's meaning-seeking model: Suffering

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- To Frankl, the world was in a terrible mess, life was full of evil and suffering.
- Therefore, to reduce human suffering is both a moral responsibility and a humanitarian calling.
- According to Frankl, it is not possible to find meaning and purpose of life without first finding the meaning of suffering.
- The search for the meaning of suffering increases the likelihood of both survival and flourishing.
- The search for meaning is in and by itself is a major source of meaning as all three levels of meaning search (each situation, life as a whole, and the ultimate meaning)

## A Taxonomy of Suffering According to Paul T. P. Wong's Suffering Hypothesis



## Varieties of suffering

- This is my initial taxonomy of the different kind of suffering based on Frankl's life and my own life experience (Wong & Laird, in press).



"It is not the physical pain which hurts the most; it is the mental agony caused by the injustice, the unreasonableness of it all."

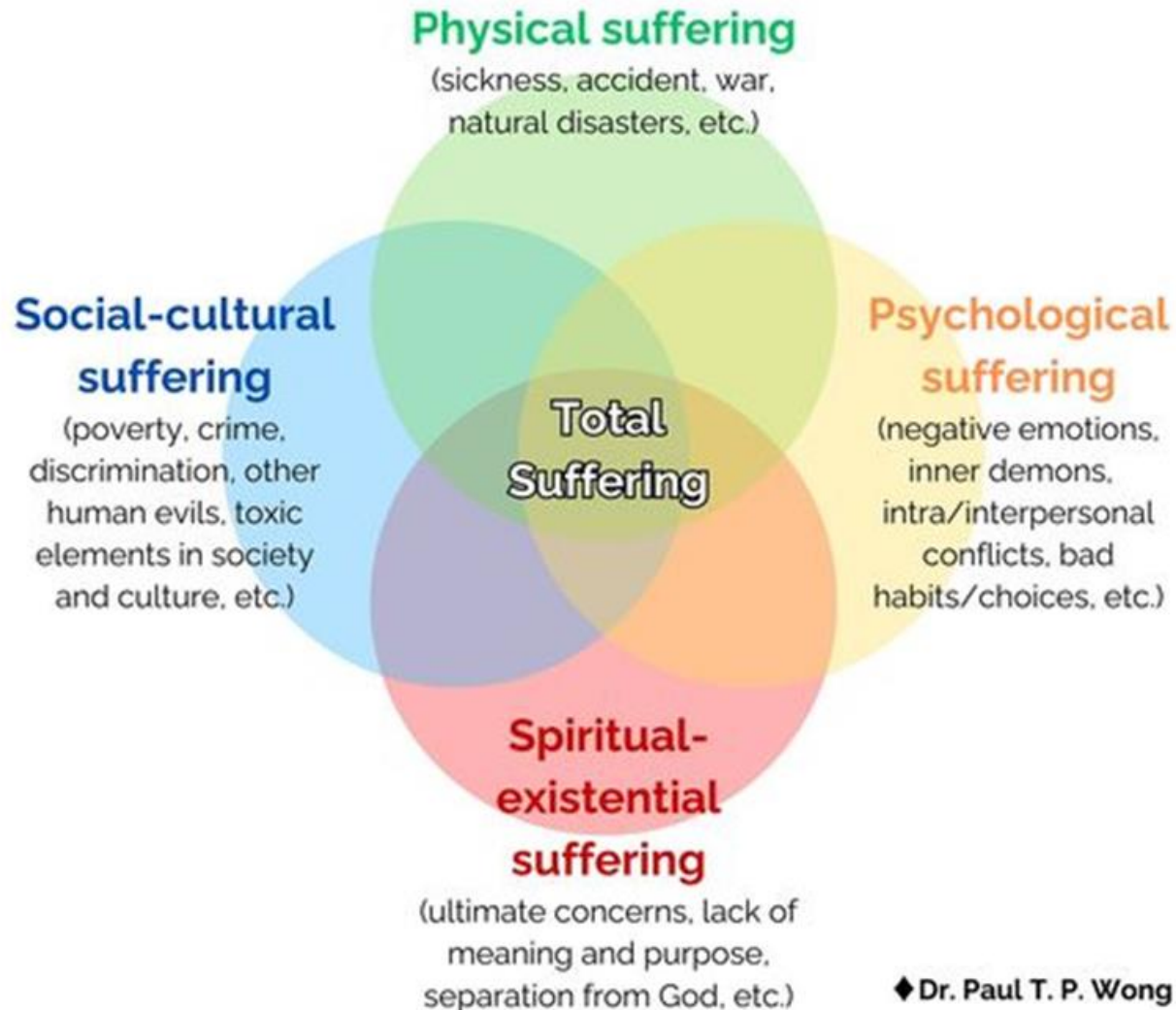
- Viktor Frankl,  
"Man's Search for Meaning"

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- Frankl realized that the invisible wounds to one's mind, heart, and soul are more difficult to heal than physical pain.
  - Relational suffering of loneliness, rejection, grieving, or separation from loved ones.
  - Psychological suffering of discrimination and betrayal.
  - Existential suffering of uncertainty, aging, unfinished life tasks, and the ultimate concerns.
  - Momentary misjudgment or careless slip-and-fall.



# FOUR MAJOR SOURCES OF SUFFERING

which contribute to mental health problems



- All suffering can be grouped into four major sources.
- Frankl was primarily struggling with spiritual-existential suffering since childhood (Krasovska & Mayer, 2021).
- Logotherapy and existential analysis are primarily concerned with spiritual-existential suffering in daily life and medical settings.

In some way,  
suffering ceases  
to be suffering at  
the moment it  
finds a meaning,  
such as the  
meaning of a  
sacrifice.

*Viktor E. Frankl*



## The power of meaning in transforming suffering

Here are some the mechanisms for the transformative power of meaning:

- Suffering awakens us from our meaningless existence and triggers our search for meaning and purpose.
- Meaningful suffering fortifies our minds to embrace and endure adversity.
- Meaning-focused coping broadens and deepens our capacity to cope with suffering.
- Sacrificial love for others is the essence of true love (Wong & Mayer, 2023).
- Suffering for others comes from a compassionate heart.

# What are the two main kinds of meaning search?

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Most people do not realize that Frankl wrestled with two kind of meaning search triggered by different life situations:

1. Negatively oriented search for meaning – triggered mainly by noxious conditions. In the grips of pain, people naturally cry out and ask: “Why me?” “Why is life so unfair?” (Wong 1991; Wong & Weiner, 1981).
2. Positively oriented search for meaning – triggered mainly by boredom, disillusion, and satiation with good things. People with everything usually seek distractions and addictions until they could no tolerate a deep felt sense of boredom and inner emptiness.





# The spiritual preconditions for successful meaning search

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- Most positive psychologists conceptualize meaning-seeking/making in cognitive-behaviour terms
- However, a complete account of successful meaning search needs to be based on spiritual preconditions, because of human evil and limitations.
- Here is the spiritual triad needed to overcome both human tragedies and the mental health crisis.

## The Basic Tenets of Logotherapy

- **Freedom of will:** Not only freedom from some negative condition but also freedom to something rewarding.
- **Will to meaning:** Striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force.
- **Meaning of life:** One can always discover meaning in life regardless of life's circumstances.

**Freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.**

Viktor E. Frankl

  
[www.idlehearts.com](http://www.idlehearts.com)

- Freedom of will is the basic human capacity to make good choices.
- Human freedom is not the freedom from conditions, but the freedom to take a stand and choose one's own path, regardless of internal and external limitations.
- Such freedom can be considered as spiritual freedom, because it originates from the "noetic" or spiritual dimension.
- It is within this spiritual realm that one has the resolve and courage to choose a meaningful life in spite of circumstances.



# Responsibility and responsibleness

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- Frankl differentiated between responsibility and responsibleness.
- Responsibility comes from the freedom of will to choose whatever we want within the limits of reality
- Responsibleness comes from our freedom to choose the right answer to the unique demand from life for each person: What is the right thing to do.

“

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked.

—  
VIKTOR FRANKL

GRACIOUSQUOTES.COM

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

# RESPONSIBILITY is the MASTER VIRTUE

making all other virtues possible.

1. SINCE I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR MY LIFE, I NEED **COURAGE** TO PURSUE MY AUTHENTIC PATH.

2. SINCE LIFE IS COMPLEX, COMPETITION IS STRONG. I AM RESPONSIBLE TO DEVELOP **KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM**.

3. SINCE I AM JUST ONE MEMBER OF THE HUMAN FAMILY, I AM RESPONSIBLE TO TREAT OTHERS WITH **HUMANITY**.

4. SINCE I AM THE CITIZEN OF A SOCIETY, I AM RESPONSIBLE TO ADVOCATE SOCIAL **JUSTICE** FOR ALL.

5. I AM RESPONSIBLE TO REGULATE MY OWN EMOTIONS AND DESIRES AND SEEK **TEMPERANCE** TO AVOID HARMING MYSELF AND OTHERS.

6. SINCE MY EXISTENCE DEPENDS ON THE SUPPORT FROM MANY PEOPLE AND A HIGHER POWER, I NEED TO SEEK **TRANSCENDENCE** AND SERVE SOME ENTITY GREATER THAN MYSELF.

- Responsibility plays a key role in Frankl's major life decisions
- A sense of responsibility got him through several crises when "his soul collapsed" under the burden of being
- Responsibility is key to resilience, positive mental health, and flourishing (Wong, 2019).
- Unfortunately, positive psychologists do not consider responsibility as essential for meaning, character development, or human flourishing.

# The Will to Meaning

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- The will to meaning is a deep-seated spiritual yearning for self-transcendence, which is a spiritual orientation of meaning in life and ultimate meaning.
- There is also a cognitive component to the will to meaning; it functions as a meaning mindset (Wong, 2011).
- Research suggests that the will to meaning is the most promising way to live one's life; it is more adaptive than the will to pleasure (Freud) or will to power (Adler).

**OUR MAIN  
MOTIVATION FOR  
LIVING IS OUR WILL  
TO FIND MEANING IN  
LIFE.**

QUOTEHD.COM

Viktor Frankl  
Austrian

# Meaning of Life

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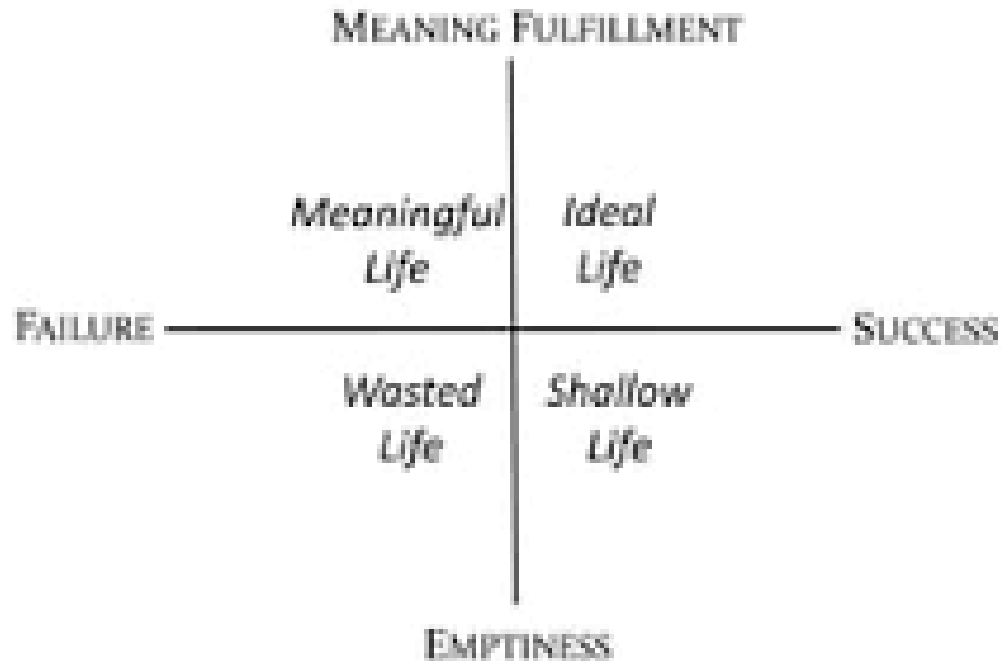
- Frankl believed in the intrinsic and ultimate meaning of life.
- Research suggests that such a worldview may be more functional than alternative global beliefs.
- He also affirmed that meaning can be found in every situation, no matter how terrible, up until one's last breath.
- Meaning can be experienced at three levels: Situational, life as a whole, and the Ultimate Meaning, which cannot be fully grasped.
- Meaning is more likely to be experienced through creative, experiential, and attitudinal values, which are motivated by self-transcendence rather than by self-interest.



# There are no losers from a meaning perspective

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## The Meaning Mindset vs. The Success Mindset





# A holistic view of meaning in life

## What is a Meaningful Life?

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

– Soren Kierkegaard

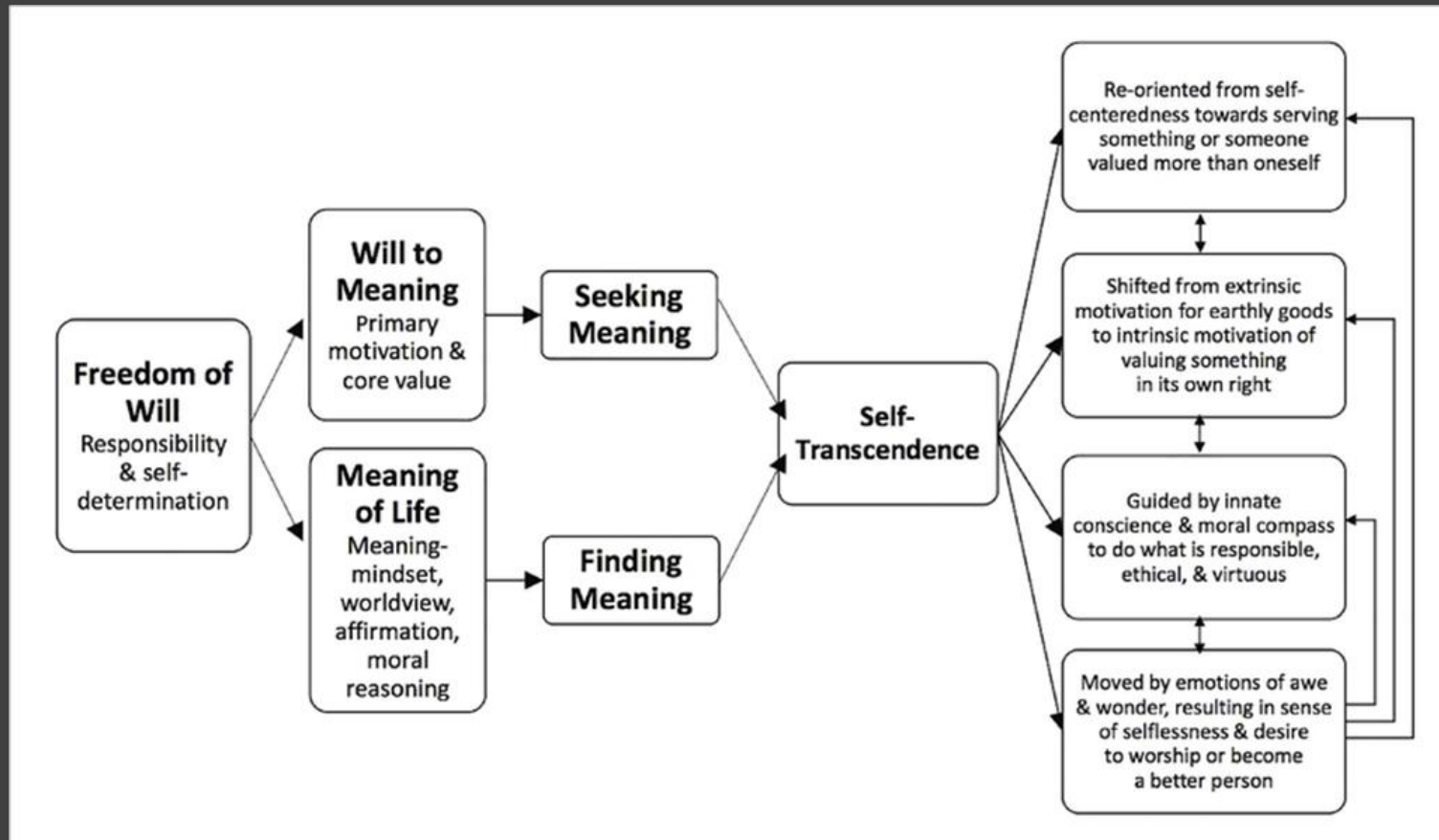
**A meaningful life** is more than just living for the present. It involves both meaning of the moment and meaning of life as a whole. It demands both the search for meaning as well as the construction of a coherent narrative about our own existence. It is both subjective and objective: Life is meaningful to the extent that we feel satisfaction that our life is purposeful and significant, but life is also meaningful to the extent that we have contributed some objective values to others and to society, even when we remain dissatisfied with our accomplishment.

**There are also fundamental beliefs** and core values which can enhance the likelihood of success in our innate quest for meaning for this earthly existence, which goes beyond the pleasures of satisfying our carnal desires and egotistic ambitions.

**These fundamental presuppositions** include: (1) life has intrinsic value and meaning, (2) we are all endowed with the aptitude and conscience to assume responsibility to do the right thing, and (3) life is more meaningful to the extent that we have a faith in a just and loving God who can guide us, protect us, and satisfy the spiritual hunger of our soul. We need meaning in order to survive and thrive in a chaotic, complex, and harsh world, which is often beyond our control.

– Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

# An overview of Frankl's meaning-seeking model



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.

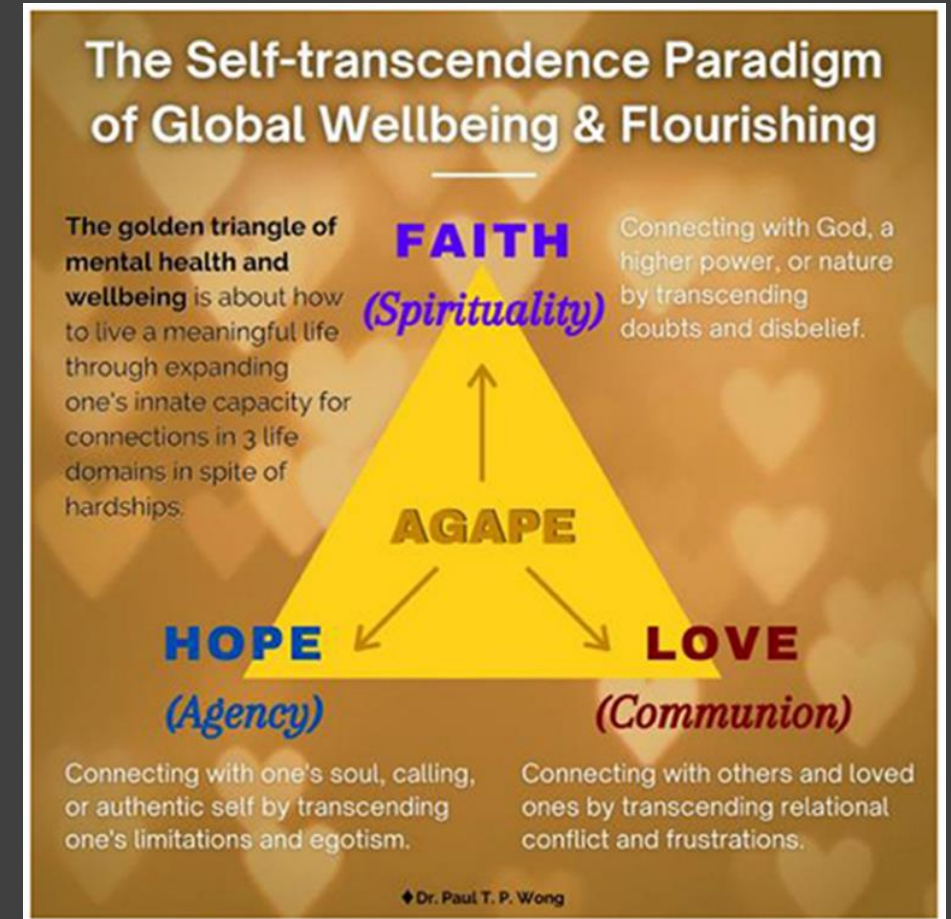
(Viktor E. Frankl)

[izquotes.com](http://izquotes.com)

- Self-transcendence represents a paradigm shift from self to others, from materialism to spiritual values.
- Self transcendence is capable of healing the broken hearted, the wounded ego, and empowering human beings to flourish in the face of suffering and death.
- It integrates the best wisdom from the East and the West, and existential psychology with positive psychology.

# The amazing power of Self-Transcendence

- Self-transcendence can transform the worse and bring out the best in us.
- It has the power of empowering people to transcend their egotistic concerns and serve something greater than themselves.
- The mega shift from self-interest to caring for others and honoring God is important for psychology and society because it is a promising way to balance self-interest with social interest.
- Paradoxically, the power of self-transcendence in contributing to wellbeing comes from embracing suffering and losing ourselves in serving the common good and a higher purpose.

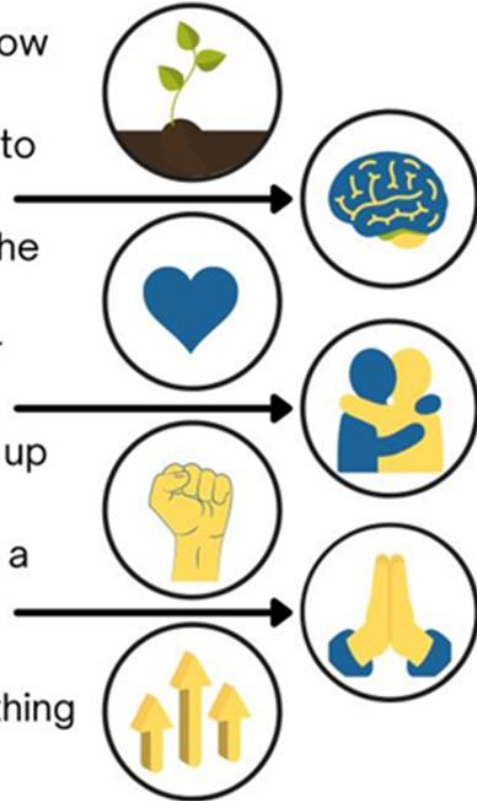




## The 7 Ways to Boost Awe and Wellbeing Based on the Self-transcendence Model of Flourishing

I stand in awe of:

1. **The power of the life force** to grow and bear fruits against all odds.
2. **The wisdom of the human mind** to probe into the mysteries of life.
3. **The virtue of love** in sacrificing the self for others.
4. **The magic of gratitude** to fill our hearts with happiness.
5. **The invincible courage** to stand up against evil.
6. **The unwavering faith** in creating a better future.
7. **The unspeakable joy** of losing oneself to become a part of something greater (e.g., nature, the Creator).



◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

## THE 7 PRINCIPLES OF SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

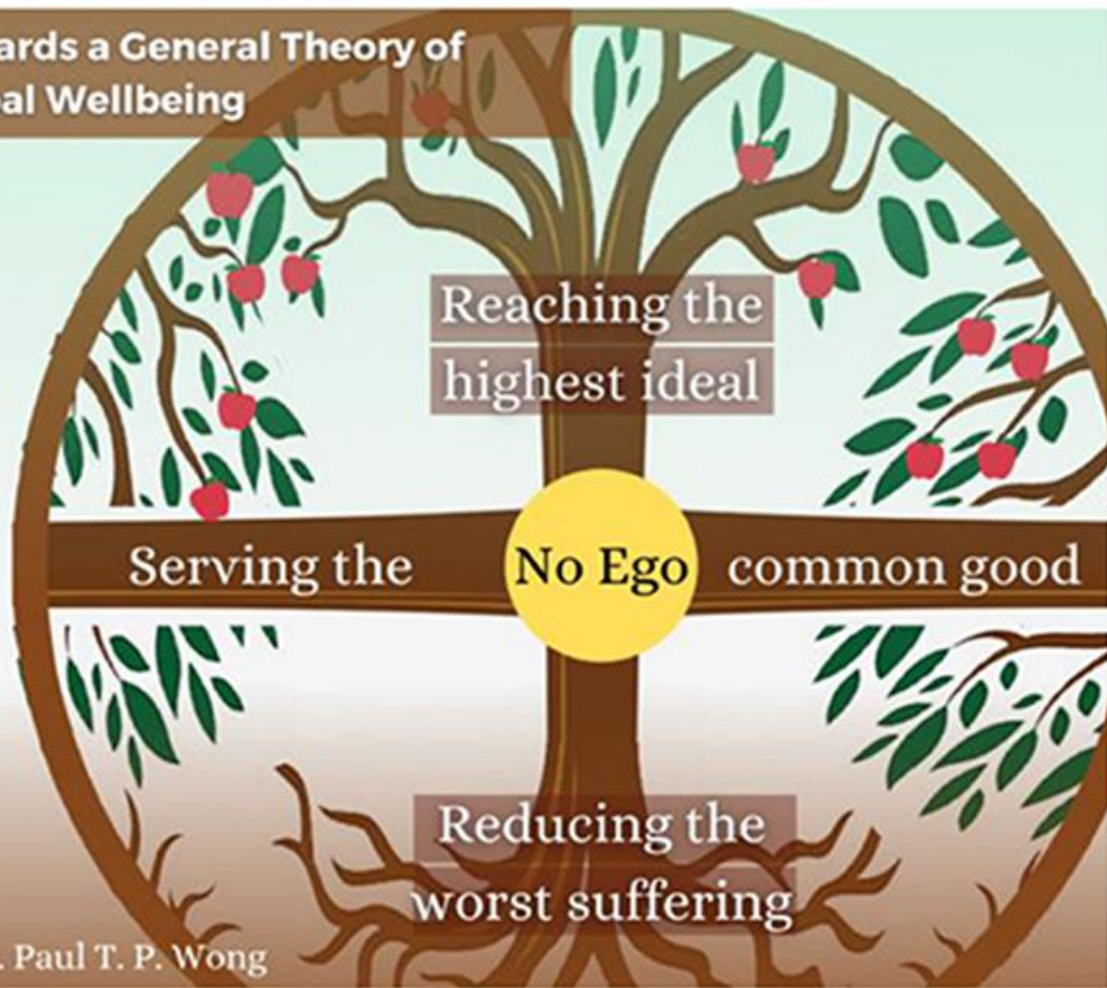
◆ DR. PAUL T. P. WONG

*The first five principles are proven strategies of overcoming and transcending suffering...*

1. **Accept life as it is with gratitude.**
2. **Believe in creating a better future with help from Providence.**
3. **Commit to worthy goals and a life purpose.**
4. **Discover the hidden treasures by digging deeper.**
5. **Enjoy inner peace and harmony.**
6. **Love others as yourself.**
7. **Fear God and obey his commandments.**

*...The last two principles are the moral foundations of caring and doing no harm.*

## Towards a General Theory of Global Wellbeing



◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

Through levels of processing, at the deepest level, all disciplines reach the same conclusion. Through the dialectical process of self-transcendence, at the highest level, all people can reach the same awe-inspiring mystery. Through selfless sacrifice, we can serve the greatest number of people. Through holistic integrative research, we can best approximate the ultimate truth of wellbeing.

Based on Frankl's logotherapy and my own research (Wong, 2021), self-transcendence can only be experienced through satisfying the deepest yearning of the soul for connections with our own selves, with others, and with God, as shown in this graph.



# EXISTENTIAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

(EPP or PP2.0) is the applied science of how to survive and thrive in spite of human limitations and inescapable suffering. It is also the science of global wellbeing through the study of human existence in all its **depths**, **heights**, and **breadths**.

- The **depths** of human suffering and spiritual yearning for meaning and truth.
- The **heights** of the transcendental values of faith, hope, and love.

The **breadths** of relating to others in different cultures.

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

Frankl's psychology of depths, heights, and breadths provide the foundation of existential positive psychology which is capable of bridging all divides and integrating all cultures.

EPP represents the future of the positive psychology of global wellbeing.

# Thank you for attending my presentation

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- If you have any questions, please contact me through [drpaulwong@gmail.com](mailto:drpaulwong@gmail.com)
- I also invite you to take my [Certificate Course on Applied Existential Positive Psychology](#).



**MODULE 1** OF THE CERTIFICATION OF  
INTEGRATIVE MEANING THERAPY &  
APPLIED EXISTENTIAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

**ADVENTURES WITH VIKTOR FRANKL  
& ADVANCES IN LOGOTHERAPY**

"A meaningful life is to experience self-transcendence  
each day." – Paul T. P. Wong

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