

**HEALTH & WELLBEING:** Victor Frankl survived the death camps. Amazingly enough, he used his experiences to develop Logo Therapy. Whilst he lost everything in the camps he discovered though his body was possessed and controlled his mind could choose to be free and thus Logo therapy was born. The modern fashion for "Mindfulness" uses similar approaches to give us control over the things which afflict us daily.



**In a world of seemingly endless troubles perhaps Logotherapy has something to offer?**

There is a growing literature which suggests that positive mental health can extend life. Yet how can we maintain PMA (positive mental attitude) we live in a world full of shocks? Unemployment, money worries, bereavement and ill health all can hit anyone at any time without warning. To be oblivious to a suffering world too, would seem unhealthy and callous. So how do we rise above suffering in an uncertain and seemingly chaotic world?

According to Victor Frankl, we don't, we have instead to search for meaning.

#### **Where did Logotherapy come from?**

Logotherapy was developed by Viktor Frankl an Austrian psychiatrist living in Vienna, who corresponded with Freud in the early part of the 20th century and because of the geographical roots of Logotherapy it is known as the third Viennese school of psychotherapy. To understand Logotherapy it is essential to know something about Frankl's early life. Frankl a Jew, was sent to various ghettos and concentration camps losing his entire close family to the gas chambers or other horrors of the holocaust, while he too suffered terrible privations. It was during this time that he began developing his therapeutic ideas.

The guards in the camp took everything away from him: his writings, clothes, his family, identity and freedom. He was made to endure slave labour and watched those around him die. One day when he was subjected to beatings and punishment by cruel guards he had an epiphany. Though his body was controlled his mind could not be and though he was in pain and suffering he still had freedom to choose his thoughts and feelings. He could choose for example, to dwell on a past blissful experience and no one could stop him.

It is this notion of choice to construct meaning even in the extreme, which is the basis of Logotherapy.

Logos is Greek for "meaning".

#### **What are the central ideas of Logotherapy?**

Logotherapy involves existential analysis. Existential analysis simply put means examining and questioning the things which we take for granted in life so that we can have better insight into our thoughts, feelings and actions

Unlike Freud, Frankl thought that each person had a healthy core at the centre of their being. The focus of therapy is to help clients become knowledgeable about the resources they have from this inner core and the third component is the realisation that life offers purpose and meaning and not necessarily happiness.

Frankl felt that even suffering could give us purpose and in his own writing he demonstrated that through the stories of clients. One story he told frequently was a visit from an elderly colleague who had been a widower for 2 years and could not get over the loss of his wife. Frankl left out the obvious platitudes and when the man had finished speaking about his pain, offered only a question:

*“How would your wife have felt if it had been you that died instead of her?”*

The man responded that she would have been bereft and inconsolable and that she would have suffered greatly. Frankl responded:

*“You have spared her that suffering by living on, now you have to pay for that with your own suffering”*

The old man thanked him, shook his hand and left. Frankl didn't take away his suffering, he could not, but he helped the man see its meaning and thus it became easier to bear. The man was given a choice about seeing it differently and he did. The suffering didn't change but his interpretation of it did.

If we can see a purpose to suffering, then it becomes manageable, even an achievement at times. To anyone who has experienced a particularly painful childbirth will understand this well. We suffer the pain of childbirth because it gives us a child.

### How can we discover meaning?

There are three equally important elements to discovering personal meaning is set out as a meaning triangle:

- **CREATIVITY:** what we give to the world through our work, hobbies, gifts given to others e.g. wisdom
- **EXPERIENCING:** what we take from the world through our relationships, meeting people, meeting nature
- **ATTITUDE:** Even if we can't choose our circumstances we can choose how we want to deal with it – transcending the situation. For example, Jane Tomlinson and Steven Sutton each chose to leave a legacy of fundraising when they were dying of cancer, other might choose a different path but equally transcendent.

A mother of an autistic son was able to **transcend** what at first seemed a tragedy when she discovered that her son would never be able to do the same things as his peers – go to university, get married or leave home. The **experience** of understanding her son and what he could do, helped her better understand what it meant to be human. She used this understanding **creatively** in that she became a support worker for children and families experiencing autism. The family together had the **attitude** that they would support their sibling/son in learning to integrate with society as much as possible. He learned to drive and gained an apprenticeship though finding long-term employment hasn't been easy. This family has discovered meaning through difficult personal events which cannot be changed or undone.

### The tools of Logotherapy

Unlike Freudian therapy, the therapist is not the expert but acts instead as a facilitator supporting the client in a journey self-discovery. The main tool for this is a system called Socratic questioning which includes:

- Clarifying “Can you explain further?”
- Challenging assumptions “What, always?”
- Evidence “How do you know that?”
- Counter: “Could this be interpreted in another way?”
- Was the question the right one or is there another issue/question?

Thus the client is helped to explore the concern without being led by the therapist's model of the world. The goals of logo therapy are then:

1. You are not a victim. You may be (ill/unemployed/bereaved) but it is not the sum of you.
2. What does this experience mean in the meaning triangle? (creativity/experience/transcendence)

3. You don't need the therapist to guide you. All you need to understand and be enlightened is already within you

#### **Further reading**

Frankl Institute: <http://www.logotherapyinstitute.org/Home.html>

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