



# Finding Meaning in Life Threatening Illness

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This paper aims to explore how to help terminally ill patients and their families find meaning in their suffering from the logotherapeutic perspective, which is the essence of palliative care. For this purpose, this paper examines the main concepts and principles of logotherapy, and specific approaches based on the logotherapeutic perspective to help terminally ill patients and their families find meaning in life are presented. Emphasizing the will to meaning as the primary motive to explain human behaviors and based on its unique perspective of the human being, which is called the dimensional ontology, logotherapy considers the human being to consist of the body, the mind, and the spirit. The dimensional ontology implies that the human being “has” the body and the mind, but the human being “is” the spirit itself. Therefore, even though a human being can be sick physically or psychologically, Accordingly, it is essential to help these patients realize that they are not their illnesses, but just have them, and to rise above themselves to reach out toward something meaningful or someone to love: despite their suffering, they can still do something meaningful, even in a small way. Above all, the most important thing for these patients is to acknowledge that they have already lived a meaningful life and to believe that their meaningful work has been safely preserved in the past and nothing can take it from them, for as spiritual beings, their lives have been meaningful unconditionally.

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## INTRODUCTION

Viktor E. Frankl, who founded logotherapy, one of the three Viennese schools of psychotherapy, defined the tragic triad (pain, guilt, and death) as inevitable experiences in life [1]. The tragic triad is unavoidable for finite human beings, but Frankl viewed humans as being capable of searching for meaning in life and realizing it despite tragedies by presenting the unconditionality in the meaning of life [2].

The German philosopher Nietzsche said, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how”. This quote reflects the logotherapeutic concept of the unconditionality of the meaning in life and the logotherapeutic perspective that views hu-

man beings as being capable of leading meaningful lives and overcoming tragedies by finding hidden meanings in tragedies or, even if they are not able to find meaning immediately, believing that there is meaning. Human beings fulfill meaningful lives by changing their attitudes toward tragedies to be positive and creative [1].

Of the various types of suffering in life, the most severe existential suffering is the awareness of dying before death [3]. More precisely, by experiencing dying, human beings feel fear towards death, which is one of the most severe forms of pain that human beings experience. Many factors underlie the fear toward death, but fundamentally this fear is based on the fear that at the moment of death, everything becomes nothing [4].

The fact that the most common question posed in the face of death relates to the meaning in life indicates the fear that life would become meaningless at the moment of death for death would turn everything to nothing. Has my life been meaningful? If it was, what was the meaning of my life? Death changes humans existence from “having” to “being”, compelling one to ask the most essential question, that is, what is meaning in my life? [5].

When discussing the tragic triad, Frankl emphasized that even the last moment of death is still meaningful for human beings. Through death, human beings meet their true selves, and death fulfills the lives of human beings [1]. Therefore, as Nietzsche indicated, even in the face of the pain of death, if human beings can discover and believe in the reason of their life—their “why”—or if they can realize how meaningful their life has already been, they have the opportunity to complete their lives through their awareness of death and dying. The physical reality of death cannot be overcome, but human beings can truly complete their lives. because death is a strong stimulus that enables human beings to go beyond pain and guilt, and to discover the meaning in life that they were not able to live before the moment. In reality, recognizing the meaning in life helps patients who are experiencing pain due to terminal illnesses that seem impossible to treat by reducing their pain through positive physical and psychological effects and prevents suicide stemming from despair. Moreover, by discovering meaning, human beings can prepare for their impending death and greet it with dignity. Thus, the meaning in life plays an important role of leading death to fulfill a meaningful life [6,7]. Therefore, meaning in life is a very important factor that must be considered in palliative care for patients in terminal illnesses.

## DISCUSSION

In light of the above considerations, how can we help patients who are experiencing pain due to terminal illness discover and be assured of the meaning in their lives? Furthermore, how can we aid the family members of terminal patients, who share patients’ pain, as they help patients find the meaning in life and provide them with the opportunity to discover the meaning in their own lives as well?

Frankl proposed that understanding who one truly is should

be the first step [1].

Logotherapy differs from other schools of psychotherapy in that it draws upon a worldview of human nature that emphasizes that human beings are defined by searching for meaning. The primary motive of human behavior is explained as humans’ will to meaning, in contrast to the will to pleasure in psychoanalysis or the will to power in individual psychology [1,2,8,9].

The motive of human behavior presented by each theory of psychotherapy reflects a certain worldview of human beings [1]. The worldview of human beings in logotherapy is that the will to meaning is the primary motive that leads people to act in a certain way. Unlike other theories of psychotherapy that define human beings as two-dimensional beings composed of the body and the mind, logotherapy defines humans as spiritual beings that transcend the body and the mind. The worldview that regards human beings as three-dimensional beings in logotherapy is referred to as the dimensional ontology [2]. According to the dimensional ontology, human beings’ body, mind, and spirit cannot be separated, and the body and the mind of human beings are united as a whole through the spirit. Therefore, if humans are not fully understood as spiritual beings, humans cannot understand who they truly are. Victor Frankl very clearly distinguished “having” from “being”. According to him, the body and the mind are what humans “have”, but the spirit “is” what humans are.

Therefore, the body and the mind can be lost, broken, or hurt while living in this world since they are things that humans have, but the spirit, which is the human being itself, cannot be lost, hurt, or broken. Human beings are emphasized as fundamentally spiritual beings that cannot be hurt or broken regardless of their religious beliefs [2]. Therefore, spiritual beings that cannot be hurt or broken will never be hurt or broken, regardless of what happens to their body or mind. Frankl emphasized that the spirit is the source of all healing and growth. Thus, even if the body and the mind are sick, humans as spiritual beings cannot be sick, so there must be always a hope. Any pain, even death, cannot cancel the spiritual essence of humans [1,2,10].

As mentioned above, the worldview of humans as spiritual beings is of the utmost importance to patients who are suffering from terminal illness, as well as for the medical profession—

als treating the patients, and their family members. According to the dimensional ontology in logotherapy, even when human beings are experiencing extreme pain due to terminal illness, the terminal illness is not to be equated with their identity as humans, but is instead what patients “have”. For example, cancer does not define the patient as a human being. The patient has an illness called cancer, and is experiencing pain due to the symptoms of cancer. The patient is not cancer itself. As such, Frankl terms the specific human ability to distinguish “having” from “being” as self-distancing [1]. Frankl emphasizes that self-distancing—manifesting as the ability to distinguish one’s self from one’s pain—is the most important factor in the process of discovering meaning [1]. Once human beings can distance themselves from their pain, they can determine their attitude towards the pain. Humans are able to distance themselves from both pain and dying, which is an experience that they “have”, enabling them to evaluate pain and death in a more objective way.

Frankl emphasizes humans as self-transcending beings, along with their uniquely human ability of self-distancing [1]. Self-transcending refers to humans’ ability to go beyond themselves and move towards a meaningful cause or someone to love. Frankl views self-transcendence as the essence of human existence [2], meaning that it determines the human being as being innate. It also means that human beings are born as self-transcending beings. Therefore, humans are most joyful and content when they are self-transcending, rather than when they are self-centered or egotistic. This notion relates to how Frankl explains human behavior in terms of the will to meaning. The will to meaning as an aspect of self-transcendence means that it is a component of human nature at birth, and since self-transcendence is directed toward other meaningful aspects of life or other people, meaning can also be explained as objective rather than subjective. Through the will to self-transcending meaning, human beings can pursue the true meaning in life and be truly joyful and content [4].

Between our birth and death, we make numerous choices in our lifetime. Meaning guides our choices. When we are faced with big or small decisions, we choose the option that is most meaningful to us. According to logotherapy, *logos* (which is translated as meaning) is something that is discovered [1]. The concept of discovery assumes that meaning already ex-

ists. Frankl states that regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, or level of education, everyone has their own unique meaning in life. Moreover, even in the worst moments in life, humans can unconditionally find the hidden meaning in those moments [2] because the meaning in life exists unconditionally. The issue lies in human choice. Humans who are able to make free choices and decisions can also determine whether they will victimize themselves in painful situations or whether they will find the meaning that exists unconditionally even in painful situations. According to logotherapy, human beings are not determined by what they receive from the world, but rather by how they respond to what they receive from the world.

During 3 dire years in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl confirmed that he and those who were caught in the camps with him were not determined by the environment of the camps, but could determine themselves whether they would be swine or saints [4]. What we receive from the world, such as genetic traits, environmental conditions, childhood trauma, inevitable pain, or incurable diseases—all of which we cannot control—does not determine who we are as human beings. Rather, how we respond to what we are given and the attitudes that we take determine who we are [1].

Just like the patient is not the terminal illness itself, the patient is capable of choosing not to be a victim of the intractable illness and to fall into despair, but instead to discover the meaning in life by determining how to respond to the situation. If human beings can find meaning even in a concentration camp, then human beings can have hope. Pain does not cause human beings to despair directly. Instead, humans experience despair because they cannot find the reason and meaning in the pain [8]. The cause of despair is the lack of meaning. However, if meaning can be found despite the pain, or if they can believe that there must be meaning, human beings can experience hope, not in despair.

Frankl explains that there are three ways to discover meaning: creative value, experiential value, and attitudinal value [2]. Creative value refers to finding meaning through giving something to the world by doing. Experiential value refers to finding meaning through the various encounters presented by the world. Human beings can find meaning through encounters with loved ones, nature, art and culture, or God. Frankl

suggests that attitudinal value is the most difficult to achieve, and thus is superior to the two other values in finding meaning [2]. Attitudinal value can be achieved through determining what attitude one will take in face of the tragic triad of pain, guilt, and death. According to logotherapy, human beings are positive and creative beings who can change inevitable human fate such as pain into a human accomplishment, spiritual beings who can mature through guilt, and beings with freedom of will who can acknowledge the finite and transient nature of life and recognize what is most important in the present moment through death. Along with pain and guilt, death presents an opportunity to discover the meaning of life that has always existed inside us but has not been discovered yet. Therefore, as described above, the elements of the tragic triad are the strongest stimuli to discovering the meaning in life.

Patients who suffer from terminal illness are no exceptions. They are positive and creative beings, spiritual beings, and beings with freedom of will who can determine how they will respond. The meaning in life discovered through creative value does not need to be a colossal achievement. Meaning is in a warm smile, a word of gratitude, and empathy towards others who are in pain that human beings show despite the pain they experience. Experiential value allows human beings to understand that they are irreplaceable in their relationships with others and discover meaning that way. Recognizing that they are the one and only to others enhances the meaning in life further [4]. The process of discovering meaning through a change in attitude towards pain and not viewing oneself as being the pain or the victim of the pain, even though the situation and fate cannot be altered, is the most proactive way to discover meaning for patients who are suffering from terminal illness.

## CONCLUSION

This paper suggests ways that patients who experience terminal illness can find meaning through the basic concepts and principles of logotherapy. Although it is important to discover meaning anew, as suggested earlier, it is even more important to help patients re-confirm that their lives are already meaningful, and remain meaningful, despite their pain and suffering by reflecting on their lives.

Logotherapy is a future-oriented approach to psychotherapy that primarily aims to provide healing and growth by assisting in the discovery of the meaning of life hidden in pain. Frankl defined the future as a treasure granary full of potential meanings and the past as a reservoir of the meanings in life already lived that do not disappear and are kept eternally [4]. The meaning that is saved in the past cannot be taken or canceled by anyone or anything. Even death cannot take away the meaning in life that is preserved in the reservoir of the past. Just like humans as spiritual beings cannot be hurt or damaged, the meaning in life lived in the past, even if it is trivial, cannot disappear. Therefore, even if it is difficult for patients who are suffering from terminal illness to find meaning in life through creative value and experiential value, and to change their attitude toward their illness and death, the opportunity to reflect on their life can help patients to find the meaning in their life that is eternally preserved in the past. By understanding their unique and irreplaceable meaning as a unique and irreplaceable being, patients can be hopeful as a meaningful being until the last moment of life.

The family members of patients who are seeking a meaningful life in the face of pain and death should see patients as human beings, rather than as their illnesses, based on a fundamental understanding of the nature of humans as spiritual beings. Family members can also have the opportunity to look back at their lives and discover meaning by helping patients to discover meaningful moments in their lives. Human beings are capable of discovering the meaning in life until the last moment of their lives. We should not forget that each one of us is spiritual being capable of distinguishing ourselves from our pain, that we can transcend ourselves in our search for a meaningful purpose in the world and find meaning at any moment, and that as spiritual beings, we have not been sick or hurt and will not be sick or hurt.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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Supplementary materials can be found via <https://doi.org/10.14475/kjhpc.2020.23.2.39>.

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