

Man's Search for Meaning Study Guide

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl

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Plot Summary

The main goal of this book is to provide perspective and techniques for a person to use to find meaning in his or her life. It is written in an autobiographical style by psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl. He discusses many specific examples from his imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, along with his professional knowledge to offer a method for discovering personal fulfillment and a sense of meaning in life. With descriptive language, Frankl creates a vivid image of this horrible ordeal. He begins the book by describing his reactions and observations at the outset of his imprisonment.

Specifically, he details the conditions of the concentration camp and defines specific terms. He tells the reader that facts are presented only as they are part of man's experience, which provides the basis for understanding the psychology of individuals who face extreme suffering. Frankl tells the story of his and others' suffering in order to provide a first hand account of the thoughts and behaviors a person goes through when confronted with such misery. He writes in a style that reflects the mindset of the individual prisoner, specifically the common and unknown person. Based on his imprisonment and his training in Psychiatry, Frankl identifies three significant periods for a prisoner: following admission into the camp; when well entrenched in camp routine; and following release and liberation.

While discussing experiences in the concentration camp, a great deal of attention is given to this first psychological phase characterized by shock. Here it is noted that Frankl and nearly every member imprisoned with him experienced the "delusion of reprieve" - a psychiatric term referring to the state of mind of condemned men who intensely hold to the notion that they will be reprieved immediately before execution. Even though he and other prisoners saw many sent to the gas chambers and watched others die from malnourishment, lack of medical care, and frequent torture, there was still a prevailing thought that they would somehow be saved. When reality began to eliminate the delusion of reprieve, suicide was common thought of nearly everyone given the brutality and hopelessness of situation. At this point, shock was replaced by the second phase of psychological reaction, apathy, as a necessary way of coping with the constant abuse.

Frankl writes that joy and suffering are relative concepts, with meaning determined by individuals in reference to their experiences and expectations. Similarly, he mentions that people have the ability to choose what will become of them mentally and spiritually.

Due to this ability of individuals to make such psychological choices, meaning can be found even in grave circumstances. Conversely, Frankl provides examples that show how people who lost hope could not find meaning in the suffering of the concentration camp, and ultimately gave in to death. The biggest source of psychological stress was of the unknown, particularly how long the imprisonment and abuse might be, as dates of relief were never provided. A man who was not able to envision the end to these circumstances was not able to aim at an ultimate goal in life. People with this mindset were often prone to unravel internally. Frankl relates this to the plight of the unemployed



worker who becomes depressed with his or her condition, continuing to limit the ability to get a job.

In discussing the psychological progression of prisoners, Frankl turns his discussion to what he refers to as the third phase, which occurs with release from the concentration camps. With this new and somewhat unexpected liberation, a difficult psychological condition is presented. Freedom is an almost dreamlike state of mind that is difficult to grasp. This is illustrated as the men timidly walk beyond the boundaries that had formerly held them prisoner, almost anticipating to be beaten for leaving the camp. Phase 2 had been so pronounced that the prisoners were now having a difficult time feeling pleased to be released. They had to relearn how to experience this emotion that had been deadened by repeated exposure to atrocities and suffering.

After discussing the liberation of the concentration camp prisoners, Frankl begins the second section of this book, *Logotherapy in a Nutshell*. Here he outlines a theory of Logotherapy as a psychological technique for helping people. In this section, Frankl discusses the basics of this approach to therapy and supports it by referring to some work with patients and again his own experiences in the concentration camps. The writing is less an autobiographical account and more a detailed presentation of psychological terms and concepts associated with logotherapy. Through an examination of logotherapy, Frankl contrasts its approach with traditional psychoanalysis and emphasizes it is the only form of therapy that can help people with their search for meaning. The meaning of life can be discovered in three ways. First, one can perform a deed. Second, one can experience something or encounter someone. Or thirdly, one can demonstrate a certain attitude toward suffering. Concepts of existential frustration, noogenic neuroses, and life's transitoriness are addressed in terms of their relative impact on a person's search for and perception of meaning.

This section focuses on how the human mind naturally processes life events and how logotherapy can be proactively used as a way to integrate psychological concepts to create a framework for discovering meaning. Logotherapy regards responsibility as the essence of existence, meaning that a person needs to determine his or her own meaning of life by answering this question in terms of individual wants and needs. Essential concepts to Logotherapy are "hyper-intention" and "hyper-reflection." Hyper-intention is the idea that trying to force something will make it impossible to achieve, and hyper-reflection is the idea that too much focus on a particular thought or behavior will lead to unhealthy outcomes. Logotherapy bases its therapeutic technique on the notion of "paradoxical intention," which is a method of focusing on unwanted circumstances as a means of utilizing hyper-intention and hyper-reflection to produce one's actual objective.

The final section, "The Case for a Tragic Optimism," makes the case that people will benefit from an optimistic perspective of life no matter what their hardships. According to logotherapy, meaning is a tangible down to earth concept. Frankl reiterates the three ways for people to arrive at meaning: accomplishing something, experiencing something or encountering someone, or turning a personal tragedy into triumph. It is noted that the third way is the most important avenue to meaning. Suicide often occurs



when people find a lack of hope and meaning in their lives, Frankl discusses how to use logotherapy to help suicidal individuals find a sense of purpose even in their suffering. Tragic optimism is the concept that a person is naturally optimistic even in the face of extremely negative circumstances. In logotherapy, this is represented with the "tragic triad" which consists of pain, guilt and death. He concludes the book by emphasizing the benefits of tragic optimism in managing the difficult moments in life, but more importantly as a means of finding the true meaning of one's existence.



"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 45)

"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 45) Summary and Analysis

Frankl begins with an autobiographical style to describe his first-hand experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. In the beginning of this section, Frankl moves from a general description of the concentration camp circumstances to a more specific discussion of his individual experiences and feelings when first arriving as a prisoner at Auschwitz. Actual examples are provided to more fully illustrate the horrors of the concentration camp. We also see how the actions of being dehumanized affected the prisoners' state of mind. These examples illustrate the shock associated with being taken to this new environment, one that had a reputation for constant pain and death. As Frankl describes the journey to this concentration camp, he states that shock is the first of three phases of psychological reactions common to all prisoners.

Shock is evident given the circumstances. One of the first experiences at this camp is the realization of the complete disregard for human comfort. Fifteen hundred prisoners are held in a shed designed to hold two hundred at most. There is little protection from the harsh weather, and one five-ounce piece of bread is the only food given to each person in a four-day period. During this time of uncertainty, virtually every prisoner held to the notion that he would somehow be reprieved from the obvious horror that lay ahead. Frankl writes that this state of mind is a direct result of the psychological phase of shock, which continues to grow. He notes that individuals were surprised that all of their possessions were taken from them, including personal items such as watches and wedding rings. Frankl mentions his most cherished possession, a manuscript that represented years of important work he hoped to publish, was immediately confiscated and destroyed. Although this manuscript had no value to his captors, it was a symbolic gesture that no aspects of personal life or human worth would be permitted among the imprisoned. This action told Frankl that all he had done in his "former" life was now considered meaningless. Along with the other prisoners, he finds it difficult to understand the concept that individuality, accomplishments, and all aspects of their life are no longer acknowledged. The basic assumptions of human existence are violated. They are perceived not as individuals, but as a group with no identity except for that of anonymous prisoner.

Frankl mentions how men and women were taken prisoner from many different job backgrounds. While they were asked to report their occupations, they were not employed in these ways as prisoners. Frankl discusses his own employment digging and laying tracks for railway lines, a marked difference from his professional experience as a Psychiatrist prior to his placement in the concentration camps. When asked to report his occupation, Frankl always responded "Doctor" and did not elaborate. He



vividly portrays the physically agonizing nature of the work, as well as the vicious treatment by his captors. As the brutal treatment of prisoners is described, the reader is told about the Capos, or prisoners who were entrusted by their captors to help keep order and obedience within the camp. Capos are said to be typically the harshest characters encountered during imprisonment. They used brutality against their fellow prisoners as a way to gain more preferential treatment for themselves. They sacrificed their own moral principles and disregarded the plight of their countrymen to enhance their own survival.

When arriving at Auschwitz, each prisoner would stand individually before an SS member for assessment. The SS officer would look over the prisoner and then point a finger to right or left. If the finger pointed left, this meant the prisoner was deemed too sick for work, and he placed in a group that was sent to the gas chambers - buildings marked 'bath' in several languages. This was the fate for about 90% of the individuals in Frankl's transport. The prisoners were stripped of all their clothing and possessions, even wedding rings, leaving them with what Frankl refers to as a literal naked existence. This is discussed as a bewildering experience for the prisoners, who had difficulty understanding that they could not keep even the meager possessions they wore on their bodies. After being stripped of their clothes, a prisoner's entire body was shaved by their jailor. These horrible experiences seemed like they could not be real, leaving the prisoners in a state of shock. Many prisoners continued to suffer from the "delusion of reprieve," an irrational belief that they would somehow be spared from the horrors before them. In some ways, this delusion was fueled by fortunate and random experiences, as when Frankl's Capo took a liking to him because he would provide helpful analysis to the Capo's stories of trouble and love, repaying him by smuggling him into a different work party - saving his life by avoiding a trip to the gas chambers.

The prisoners' thoughts of humane treatment began to vanish as their expectations were violated one by one. A grim sense of humor now characterized their state of mind. For example, when they saw running water come out of the showers - instead of serving as the well-known gas chambers - they tried to make fun of themselves and each other. Still in a state of shock, humor was a tool for surviving the physical brutality and psychological uncertainty. Curiosity was also a tool of the mind used for this purpose. Frankl describes it as a cold curiosity, one that was a product of detached emotions and seemed almost like an objective third party observation. Examples include wondering what would be the result of standing wet and naked in the cold open air as required in the concentration camps.

The prisoners' curiosity allowed them to examine seemingly unbearable aspects of the camp as though the horrors were not personally happening to them. Time after time, they were surprised to learn the things they could endure that they would have previously imagined impossible. These remarkable examples of survival include developing healthy teeth and gums despite a complete absence of hygiene and avoiding infection in cuts in spite of the dirty nature of the assigned work and without bathing for long periods. Over time, however, the shock of the environment and the body's responses diminished. Reality became more pronounced and the temporary relief of humor and curiosity gave way to feelings of hopelessness.



Suicidal thoughts were common. The prisoners developed the phrase 'run into the wire' to describe the most common form of suicide, touching the electrically controlled fence that bordered the camp. Overcome by shock and loss of hope, the prisoner of Auschwitz did not fear death because it allowed him to end his suffering without taking his own life. As this suffering continued, the first psychological reaction of shock is replaced with apathy. This is a common reaction experienced by all prisoners as a necessary coping device for the brutality and death they encountered on a daily basis. After it was obvious there would be no reprieve and death was accepted by many as only a matter of time, the prisoners felt a general apathy toward it and toward the mistreatment of others. In this phase, people no longer looked away when their fellow prisoners were savagely beaten, because repeated exposure to such brutal acts had numbed their feelings. This is explained by Frankl as a means of developing a very necessary protective shell, so that people could keep their sanity amid such atrocities. Witnessing beatings, death, starvation, and suicide did not result in any feelings of horror, disgust, or pity. They simply felt nothing.

Several important themes are introduced in this section. First is the psychology of the Capos. They are described as endorsing the brutality of the concentration camps and behaving in abusive ways themselves as a method of trying to improve their own fate. Frankl clearly finds this way of thinking and this behavior despicable, not because of the suffering this promoted, but because it represents a failing of the mind and of the human character. When imprisoned, the people who became Capos gave up their values and dignity in a selfish attempt to help themselves. They embraced abuse for preferential treatment. In developing his thesis on man's search for meaning, Frankl emphasizes that meaning comes from within oneself in spite of the negativity of surrounding misery. Personal responsibility is a way for an individual to find meaning by not succumbing to the destructive mindset of others, but by holding true to oneself. By altering their attitudes and behaviors, the Capos clearly were not capable of reaching this higher plane of human existence.

This section discusses many examples of brutality and abuse, illustrating how little value was placed on the human lives of the prisoners. The writing conveys a vivid image of irrational beatings for no reason, working in the cold with no gloves or coat, and enduring the indignity and humiliation aimed at prisoners from SS and Capos in the form of verbal degradation, judgments, and violent and demeaning physical abuse. By witnessing this reality being reinforced repeatedly, Frankl explains the psychological difficulty of being treated as meaningless. He uses the example of an SS official evaluating each prisoner and casually deciding his fate with a point of the finger, which would determine if a prisoner was sent to work or immediately taken to the gas chambers.

A treatment that conveyed no human worth was dangerous to the state of mind of the prisoners. If they accepted this reality, their diminished sense of self would have negative consequences for their psychological processes, affecting the way they perceived the meaning of their existence. Frankl explains how it is very difficult to resist overcoming the negative reactions to such treatment. Nonetheless, he does lay the



foundation for individual choice regarding personal thoughts and psychological reactions.

Frankl emphasizes the different phases of psychology that were common to all prisoners. The first is shock and it receives the most attention in this section, and this state of mind is used to explain what the prisoners were initially feeling and how this caused them to behave in seemingly irrational ways. For example, Frankl discusses how he smiled when a long-term prisoner told a group that Frankl was the only person who needed to fear being selected for the gas chamber. The delusion of reprieve is presented as a powerful illustration of the psychological phase of shock. The prisoners had difficulty understanding how their lives had suddenly been subjected to this new reality. As they were in the first days of imprisonment, they held to the belief that their confinement would soon end.

Also important in this section is Frankl's revelation as to the capabilities of the human spirit. He details the horrible conditions that existed, such as nine men sleeping on tiered beds measuring six-and-a-half to eight feet with only two blankets to share among them, surviving on minimal food with little nutritious value, and experiencing physical beatings and suffering. If these conditions had been described to the prisoners before their confinement, it seems they would say they could not survive. Although coping was extremely difficult, many prisoners were able to survive. By overcoming such a horrible reality, Frankl says the prisoners would agree with Dostoevski's concept of man as a being who can get used to anything. Yet he notes they could not explain how they were able to do so. This indicates that individuals have a profound capacity to endure extreme conditions through a complex psychological process. However, the examples indicate this process does not merely exist by default for all people, rather that it is necessary to maintain a perspective of hope and finding meaning in suffering.

Frankl writes that, as brutality was so commonplace and there appeared no end in sight, prisoners became desensitized to the beatings, humiliation, and death they saw around them. At this point, he and others experienced the second psychological phase common to all prisoners, that of apathy. Apathy was developed not simply because of what the prisoners saw, but more importantly how they were treated. Being treated as unworthy of basic human dignity was an insulting process that dealt a psychological blow more powerful than the physical abuse. With this dehumanizing treatment so prevalent, the prisoners came to believe in many ways that they had lost their value to the world. Resigned to this acquired self-identity, many prisoners were incapable of experiencing the thoughts and feelings of a rational person. Their emotions vanished.



"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 72)

"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 72) Summary and Analysis

This section begins by revisiting the psychological reaction of apathy and discussing the severe undernourishment of the prisoners. Survival was difficult based on the little food they were provided. A typical daily meal consisted of a 10 ? oz piece of bread and 1 ? pints of watery soup, often less. This was the direct cause of many deaths due to starvation, and indirectly it caused many more as the malnourishment would cause weakness and sickness that would ultimately result in a trip to the gas chambers. Because hunger was a constant part of the prisoners' reality, talk in the trenches would often turn to food, especially when the SS was absent. The greatest difficulty was waking up to the shrill sound of a whistle at dawn, awoken from an exhausted sleep to begin another day of hard work with extreme hunger.

Frankl writes that a "cultural hibernation" was present within the camp. Prisoners were simply consumed with their own survival. There were exceptions to this hibernation, most notably the topics of religion and politics. Regarding the war, prisoners based their discussions on rumors that had made their way to the camp. Because the prisoners were not directly connected to reliable sources of information, the rumors were often misleading and contradictory. These rumors were influenced by the prisoners own hope of freedom, and their optimistic suggestions that the war was concluding resulted in many instances of disappointment when they proved false. Religion was something that grew strongly among the prisoners on a deep individual level. Improvised prayer services provided an outlet for spirituality to grow. Individuals were able to escape from the harsh reality around them for the temporary comfort of spiritual freedom. Frankl writes that this brought an inner strength that was so powerful it allowed the physically weak to survive malnutrition and abuse better than prisoners who were more physically robust.

Similarly, Frankl indicates that salvation was found through reflections on love. He mentions how strong his wife's image was as he thought of her, so powerful a sensation he believed he could hear her answer his questions. Frankl found these moments among the most powerful things he experienced, providing him with strength and perspective. While thinking vividly of his wife, Frankl writes that he felt a poetic inspiration that left him feeling very wise. With this newfound wisdom, Frankl concludes that love is the highest goal to which a person can aspire. This knowledge proved a great help in enduring the suffering of the concentration camp. It provided a mental escape where Frankl could enjoy conversations with his wife. These conversations helped Frankl maintain a perspective on the meaning of life. He was able to recall with fondness many intimate experiences of the past, which no matter what happened in the



present or future, nothing could eliminate these cherished memories. However, love was not simply a concept thought of in the past tense. It was something that he enjoyed in his heart throughout imprisonment.

Although separated from his wife physically, Frankl discovers the power of love and its meaning in his life. He realizes that even though he wasn't sure if his wife was still alive, love goes beyond the physical existence of a person. This awareness provided Frankl with a fulfilled sense of his life that provided a refuge from the emotional emptiness of the camp. As this inner life intensified, Frankl writes that the prisoner gained a profound appreciation for the beauty of art and nature. In spite of the poor conditions of the camp, prisoners still had the opportunity to choose to find positive experiences to appreciate. Scenes like the mountains of Salzburg or even a simple sunset allowed the prisoners to experience a sense of happiness. Art took the form of songs, poems, and jokes performed in huts as a spontaneous sort of cabaret. Frankl writes that this appreciation was powerful enough to excite the men even at the end of a tiring day. Even as they worked hungry and cold, they would stop and appreciate the magnificence of nature. This allowed them to remember that there was still a part of the world that was beautiful. Many would miss their daily portion of food to experience these pleasures. Similarly, they relished makeshift art and theatre, like a fellow prisoner singing opera in Italian at lunch one day. Spiritual life deepened despite the physical and mental primitiveness of the concentration camp.

In addition to this evolving appreciation of art and nature, the prisoners developed a sense of humor as another way of coping with the suffering of the camp. Frankl writes that humor, more than any other human capability, can provide an ability to rise above any type of situation, even if only for a few seconds. Knowing this power, Frankl tells how he actively worked to train a friend to develop a sense of humor as a trick for mastering the art of living. His method of training was to make an agreement with his friend that they would each promise to invent one amusing story each day about something that would happen after they were liberated from the camp. The jokes shared by prisoners often had an underlying satire about the daily life of the camp. Hence, humor served as a powerful weapon in the fight for self-preservation.

Frankl contends that the relative size of human suffering is relative. He uses gas as an analogy, noting that if gas is pumped into a chamber it will proceed to fill the room no matter how large. Similarly, suffering completely fills the human mind and soul. Individual perspective will determine the relative magnitude of such suffering. For example, he discusses seeing a group of convicts pass the work site and feeling jealous with the thought that they probably had toothbrushes, baths, and mail correspondence with their relatives. The prisoners of the concentration camps had lost all of these privileges immediately upon their confinement. This perspective made the suffering in the concentration camp appear that much worse.

As with suffering, joy is also a relative concept. Frankl emphasizes that although the camp was characterized by suffering, this did not necessarily dictate that joy could not occur. As evidence, he provides examples that show the prisoners' joy under seemingly joyless circumstances. For instance, one could find happiness in a crumb of bread when



feeling completely famished. The type of work assigned to a prisoner was also something that provided joy, such as the opportunity to work in the sheltered room of a factory rather than the frigid and filthy conditions outside. They were grateful for the chance to shower before going to bed, even though this consisted of standing naked in an unheated hut where icicles hung from the ceiling. Most importantly, the prisoners demonstrated an ability to find joy in even the most horrible circumstances - like standing outside frozen and soaked - when they were kept in a camp without gas chambers.

Frankl explains that not everything connected with the immediate task of keeping oneself and closest friends alive lost its value. Sometimes this resulted in behavior that was harmful to other prisoners. They sometimes acted on instincts of self-preservation and the reality that human life was regarded as worthless. He compares the treatment of the prisoners to a flock of sheep, as they were herded without regard for their wishes while a dangerous pack monitored their behavior. During these times, Frankl describes how the prisoner attempted to position himself in the middle of the pack and behave as inconspicuously as possible, in an attempt to avoid random beatings and other forms of abuse. Other times, the prisoner would yearn to be apart from the group, as the enforced communal life contributed to the sense that individuality did not exist. With their self-identity and individual value stripped from them, the prisoners had to struggle with the psychology that they were no longer an individual capable of free will. If a prisoner could not avoid this mindset, Frankl says he descended into an animal-like state of existence.

This section uses actual events and individuals' reactions to these events to illustrate the range of psychological capabilities. Frankl continues with his autobiographical account to depict experiences as a way of providing perspective on prisoners' state of mind. As he describes the malnutrition and starvation, he is not simply relaying aspects of physical suffering. In fact, he discusses these instances to emphasize their impact on the psychology of the prisoner. Beyond enduring the intense hunger and weakness, prisoners were forced to helplessly watch their bodies become mere skeletons. They looked upon their malnourished and completely shaven bodies and were reminded that they had in essence become a new person. They watched as their fellow prisoners wasted away to the point where it could be predicted who would be the next to die of starvation or be taken away to the gas chambers, when deemed incapable of physical work.

Even being close to corpses crawling with lice did not bother Frankl. This is discussed from the continuing perspective of apathy introduced in the previous section, where the prolonged suffering and death creates a state of mind that lacks the emotional capacity to feel sorrow even amongst such devastating circumstances. Apathy not only results in a lack of reaction to personal loss and the suffering of others, but also in the absence of sexual desire. Frankl believes this is due to a combination of undernourishment coupled with shock. He notes how this is very different from other all male outfits, like army barracks, where conversation and thoughts focus heavily on sexual issues.



Consistent with the prevailing apathy, Frankl provides many examples that illustrate the emergence of a sense of humor among the prisoners. From an outside perspective, this appears strange given the frequent misery of the camp. However, humor was not something random or purposeless. It was a necessary outlet for coping with the suffering. By discussing instances where humor was deliberately used by the prisoners, Frankl illustrates his understanding that this was the most powerful tool for overcoming the brutal environment of the camp. A prisoner who did not develop this sense of humor was denying himself a valuable psychological trick to prolong his life. It is no accident that Frankl discusses the use of humor along with apathy. Only when the mind experienced this phase common to all prisoners was it capable of finding humor in horrible situations and human tragedy.

This section gives much focus on the power of the mind as an escape from the horrible conditions of the concentration camp. While Frankl writes of the ability to find meaning and some form of joy in suffering, he notes that this is not the only way of feeling happiness. Nostalgia is also a central means of finding fulfillment under such circumstances. By reflecting on his memories of his life, specifically the love and fond moments with his wife, Frankl was able to find profound meaning in his past. This is an important concept because it represents a strong sense of empowerment. No matter what abuse the prisoners had to endure, and no matter what their fate in the concentration camp, no one was able to take away from them their memories, thoughts, and accomplishments in life. In this way, individuals could choose to reflect favorably on the past, using nostalgia as a tool for temporary escape from the abuses of the camp.

As this section progresses, Frankl begins to move beyond descriptions of the suffering to illustrate the main theme of this book: that meaning and fulfillment can be found even in such circumstances. He introduces a very important concept, that suffering and joy are relative. This is important because it lays a foundation for a major aspect of Frankl's theory presented throughout the book, that individuals have a large measure of personal choice in determining their feelings about life. A person is not predisposed to react to suffering by giving up hope. Frankl offers the concept of "negative happiness" - a state of mind that finds joy in the absence of suffering - to explain how some prisoners maintained a healthy psychology. He uses examples from the concentration camp to illustrate how he and other prisoners were able to perceive joy even under such horrible conditions. This provides valuable context for the major premise of the book, allowing the reader to understand the concept of meaning through suffering via descriptive imagery and inspiring narrative.

Although Frankl introduces the notion that individuals have some measure of choice in determining the relative value of suffering and happiness, he does not contend this is an easy or automatic decision. Individual differences will contribute to their psychological reactions and determine behavioral and mental choices. Frankl notes that not all individuals are capable of perceiving joy in the midst of difficult circumstances. For many, small sorrows may completely engulf their psychological state leading them to fixate on the negativity of these difficulties. In this case, the ability to perceive a reason for suffering is extremely difficult. When this is the case, the reality of imprisonment will lead to a focus on the negativity of the situation: lack of freedom, malnourishment, and



physical abuse. Without a sense of meaning, hope is lost and individuals concede their sense of personal worth. Under these conditions, people typically choose animalistic behaviors in an attempt to survive or accept a complete loss of hope. Such psychologically unhealthy reactions cannot produce anything but a mental and subsequent physical demise.



"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 115)

"Experiences in a Concentration Camp" (through page 115) Summary and Analysis

Frankl continues to describe how no regard was placed on human life by his captors. Individuals were regarded as numbers, rather than people with value, history, or even names. Men who were sick and starving were put on a list to be taken away on carts pulled by other prisoners through the cold and snow. If one died before the cart left, his corpse was thrown on the cart anyways. It didn't matter if the men were dead or alive, only if the cart had the same number of bodies as the list. Much attention was given to the proper numbers on the list, while individual identity and survival meant nothing. This mentality and sustained abuse continued to reinforce the psychological state of apathy. Prisoners who were dead or dying were often stripped of their meager shoes and rags by other prisoners who were attempting to increase odds of their own survival. There was no sentiment attached to such behaviors.

When arriving at Auschwitz Frankl vowed to let fate take its course. He did not attempt to have his name crossed off the transport list, and was moved willingly under the assumption he was headed to the gas chambers. Ironically, this saved his life, as extreme famine and cannibalism broke out in old camp. This illustrates the point that camp inmates were afraid to make decisions, as the feeling was fate was one's master, preferring to let fate make the choice for him. While the prisoner could choose to maintain his thoughts, he could not directly control all that would happen to him. For example, Frankl once made a specific plan to attempt to escape with another prisoner. However, he changed his mind to stay with the patients he was caring for in the camp. This decision gave him an inward peace that he had never before experienced in his life.

Not long after his aborted escape plan, it was rumored the camp was to be evacuated and burned, and death appeared imminent. Frankl made a second plan to escape with his friend and was minutes away from the attempt when the International Red Cross in Geneva arrived and the members of the camp were under its protection. It now appeared escape was unnecessary. The prisoners of his camp were taken to presumably safe places, while Frankl was left behind to wait for the next truck. This was another twist of fate that saved his life, as the men who had left were taken to a hut and burned to death rather than finding safety. This made Frankl recall a parable he mentions earlier in the book, known as Death in Teheran.

According to this story, a servant begs his rich Persian master to lend him a fast horse because he just encountered Death, who had threatened him. The master gave the servant his horse, and he rode to Teheran. When the master went back into his house, he too encountered Death, and asked why the servant was threatened. Death replied, "I



did not threaten him; I only showed surprise in still finding him here when I planned to meet him tonight in Tehran." This is used to show that life and death seemed to be a matter of predestined and unpredictable fate. The next truck never came, but the battlefield reached the camp, and the strong military presence finally gave Frankl and the remaining men their freedom.

Frankl tells the reader that the prisoners' reactions to the concentration camp prove that man can overcome his surroundings. He emphasizes that if there is a meaning in life at all, there must be a meaning in suffering. The way man handles suffering, in terms of his behavior, emotion, and mental processes provides him with the opportunity to add deeper meaning to his life. He can preserve his belief system, stay true to his fundamentals, and gain strength in the honor and empowerment of this decision, or he can give in, relinquish human dignity and take the path of animal instinct. Frankl maintains what was needed was a fundamental change of attitude. Instead of relying on individual expectations from life, the confinement in the concentration camps required prisoners to examine what life expected from them.

Frankl says that from the perspective of a prisoner, thoughts like this kept him from despair, even when death seemed certain. He paraphrases Dostoevki's famous sentiment that a person's response will determine if he is worthy of his suffering or not and discusses two cases of would be suicides that were prevented by getting the men to realize life was still expecting something of them. For one, it was his son waiting for him in another country. For the other, a series of books that he had written needed to be finished. Suicide was averted because these men realized their individual sense of purpose, and embraced their suffering as a necessary condition of their ultimate fulfillment. Frankl notes that when prisoners came to this realization, they refused to minimize the camp's tortures by ignoring them or masking them with artificial optimism. In this way, many prisoners became aware of the hidden opportunities for achievement that were available through suffering.

Many examples are provided that address Frankl's theory that joy and suffering are relative concepts. In discussing an experience long after his release, Frankl writes of being shown a photograph of prisoners lying crowded in a bunk. The person showing him the photo is disgusted by the image, and comments on how terrible this situation must have been. Frankl sees the image from a different perspective, as his mind contemplates his own experience in the camp full of suffering and death. He recalls how grateful he was for the moments when he could lay down, had shelter from beatings and terrible elements of the weather. He concludes the people in the photograph may not have been so unhappy after all.

Losing faith in the future was something all prisoners feared, not specifically for themselves but for their friends. They had observed this many times, usually beginning with the prisoner refusing to get dressed, regardless of beatings or threats. A powerful example is given in which Frankl's senior block warden told him of a dream he had in which a voice told him the war would be over on March 30. As this day drew near, the man suddenly developed a high fever, became delirious and lost consciousness on March 30, and was dead on March 31. The loss of hope literally was shown to have a



deadly effect, which is also demonstrated by the highest death rate in the camp between Christmas and New Year's, as the prisoners lost hope in their previous belief that they would be released by this time.

For those who maintained hope, solidarity formed amongst the prisoners. When it was discovered one man had stolen several pounds of potatoes, camp authorities ordered the man to be turned in. Otherwise, the entire camp would not be able to eat for a day. Giving up the man meant his death, and 2500 men opted to fast that day rather than reveal the man's identity. While some were able to find positive thoughts in these conditions, morale among the prisoners was mostly low. Even Frankl, who had a heightened understanding of the importance of positive psychological thinking, had moments where he felt dejected and depressed. The senior block warden was a wise man, and noticed the somber mood of the group the same night they had gone without food. He mentioned some of the recent deaths and reasoned that they were most likely due to a complete loss of hope. He called on Frankl to elaborate on this concept to his fellow prisoners, knowing the expert words of one of their peers would help them in coping with their surroundings. Although he was in no mood to provide therapy, Frankl rose to the occasion and stressed the importance of hope. He delivered an eloquent speech to the prisoners, which was so powerful it made many of the men cry. It had the desired effect. Many of the men personally thanked Frankl for his words and felt they had gained a more positive perspective because of them.

Although many died under these conditions, some managed to keep faith and survive the abuse and malnourishment. For these fortunate men, liberation did come eventually. Frankl writes that this led to the third psychological phase common to all prisoners at this point, the stress that accompanied being liberated. Liberation from such extreme suffering could be a dangerous consequence to the mind. When first released, the concept of freedom was difficult to grasp. Some men, unable to escape the constant thoughts of the ruthlessness of their earlier years now felt compelled to use their freedom without regard for others. In their minds, they were now the oppressors instead of the oppressed, and they justified their prior suffering by becoming sources of willful force over others. Frankl says only slowly were some men able to transition back to a world where no one has the right to do wrong, even if injustice has been inflicted upon them.

This is characterized generally by Frankl as mental deformity. In addition, he notes there were two other fundamental experiences that resulted from the sudden release of mental pressure: bitterness and disillusionment. In order to physically and psychologically survive the abuse of the concentration camps, people had to place a high emphasis on hopes and dreams of the future upon their liberation. However, when returning to their homes, many found that there was little waiting for them, and they were now faced with the realization that in spite of all the suffering they had endured as prisoners there was more suffering. This was a premise that was difficult to understand and accept.

It was an almost dreamlike state of mind that characterized the men, as they timidly walked beyond the boundaries that had formerly held them prisoner. They almost



anticipated being beaten for leaving the camp. Phase 2 had been so pronounced that the prisoners were now having a difficult time feeling pleased to be released. They had to relearn how to experience this emotion that had been deadened by repeated exposure to atrocities and suffering. It wasn't until days after his liberation when Frankl was walking alone through meadows and was overwhelmed with the beauty of nature that he experienced a sense of freedom. As he fell to his knees and called out to the heavens, he realized his new life had started and he was on his way toward becoming a human being again.

This section is written to illustrate Frankl's overall philosophy supported by specific human examples. In this way, it shifts focus from the previous sections of the book, which were designed more to provide examples leading to the basic premise of the search for meaning. Here much attention is given to the meaning of life, as the examples show this includes suffering and death. Frankl elaborates that every day there were opportunities to make choices, to give in to the notion of becoming a plaything of circumstance or maintain individuality through an inner sense of self. Frankl emphasizes this philosophy by revealing many instances where his fellow prisoner endured vast suffering and degradation and eventually death, yet they did not succumb to a loss of their inner self, holding true their sense of personal thought and freedom. According to Frankl, this is the spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

Frankl invokes the critical importance of personal responsibility and accountability in this process. He emphasizes that the mental reactions of prisoners are more than a mere expression of physical and sociological conditions. The type of person a prisoner became was much more a direct result of his inner self rather than a reflex response to negative stimuli. Frankl writes that it is the decision of the individual to determine what will become of him under an environment of grief and suffering. He provides examples that show a strong sense of spiritual freedom among men who would not concede their beliefs or compromise their behavior even when confronted with constant pain and loss. In this way, they found great meaning in their life and proved worthy of their suffering. Because individual responsibility is vital, the meaning of life differs from person to person depending upon personal objectives and philosophies and the inherent uniqueness of the situation. While Frankl uses examples of prisoners in the concentration camp to reflect the notion of individual will in finding true meaning, this is not a concept reserved for any particular group. It is an overarching principle that applies to all people across myriad situations.

The majority of prisoners in the concentration camps suffered from an inferiority complex, since most had once 'been somebody' prior to imprisonment and now they were treated like complete nonentities. However, some prisoners were able to overcome the degradation and maintain their inner values, keeping positive thoughts whenever possible. Fate was viewed as something out of the direct control of the prisoners, but their attitudes and reactions to suffering could be focused in a healthy psychological way. Such was the case when prisoners made the determination to honor their lives through fond remembrances of the past and optimistic thoughts of the future. Capos, cooks, storekeepers, and camp policemen did not feel inferior. In fact, they felt they were promoted to prominent positions, leading to miniature delusions of grandeur.



The senior block warden and commander of the camp are presented in contrast with the Capos to illustrate that good and evil exist within all people from all cultures and societies. For instance, the commander of the camp is described as a person who was far different from most of the oppressive captors, a man who personally paid for medical supplies for the prisoners from his own pocket and never showed any violence toward the prisoners. Upon the prisoners' liberation, they insisted this commander be spared any harm from the American troops. Even in a ruthless environment, humanity was sometimes evident from the oppressors, as in the day a camp foreman gave Frankl a small piece of bread, a gesture that he found extremely moving. This is a profound contrast to the Capos, who embraced the brutal treatment of their fellow prisoners, providing the prime example of indecency and absence of values. Many of the camp guards also embraced their role. Some were sadists who enjoyed taking comforts and inflicting pain. For a majority of guards, their feelings had been dulled by years of repeated exposure. They were morally and mentally hardened, and even the ones who did not actively engage in brutal behavior did not prevent others from doing so.

Psychology is shown to play a major role in the physical survival of the prisoners. Those who were mentally capable of perceiving suffering as something to be embraced were able to maintain an authentic self-identity and preserve sanity. Although Frankl stresses the extreme importance of hope and honor of personal values to fuel the will to live in spite of horrible treatment, he uses examples to show the vast difficulty of this mindset. He speaks of his own struggles with feeling severely depressed, showing that this is the natural human response to such brutality and a difficult mentality to escape. It is written that the most depressing influence for prisoners was the uncertainty of the length of imprisonment. Again, this highlights a natural human response. Individuals have a fundamental desire to understand their surroundings and have a measure of control over their destiny. This is a larger concept that is not restricted to the concentration camps, but can apply to any instances where person is confronted by suffering that challenges individual will and personal values. Frankl offers the terminally ill as an example of others who are faced with finding meaning in difficult situations. However, it is noted only a few are capable of reaching such enlightenment.

Many of the prisoners were unable to find relative joy in the concentration camps, and fell victim to the negative psychology of lost hope and uncertainty. Without a healthy framework for finding meaning in suffering, the atrocities of the camp were mentally overwhelming. Living in such conditions is referred to by Frankl as a "provisional existence of unknown limit" that could lead to unequalled levels of doubt and stress. This was especially true when prisoners accepted the reality that they had no influence over their fate. It was a depressing concept to acknowledge a dependence on the moods of guards, a feeling described by Frankl as "playthings of fate."

In his discussion of the parable of Death in Teheran, Frankl stresses the human belief that people have a fundamental desire to control their fate. However, the parable is used to show that, despite deliberate efforts to avoid death, this fate cannot always be controlled. He makes it a point to tell the reader that upon entering Auschwitz he determined to let fate take its course, providing some psychological relief of the uncertainty and lack of control. It is with the individual thoughts and behaviors that a



person determines if they will become a plaything of fate. This is not a reality merely dictated by imprisonment in the camp. Again, this powerful sentiment reflects Frankl's view of free will and personal choice in accepting attitudes regarding environment and self-identity.

The concept of time is discussed as something that was perplexing to the prisoners. A small unit of time appeared endless but longer periods elapsed quickly. Specifically, a week actually seemed to go by faster than a day, a perception shared by Frankl's fellow prisoners. Not anything related to present life outside the barbed wire of the prison camps seemed real. However, this was a very dangerous psychological situation, because this led to a tendency to live exclusively in the past and ignore all aspects of the present and even the future, thus depriving themselves of their inner being and ultimate goals.

Frankl recalls his own struggle with this choice, noting how in the midst of physical and psychological pain he at first found himself consumed with trivial thoughts, like what he would get to eat that night. Then he transformed his thoughts to envision himself lecturing to an audience on the psychology of the concentration camps. This was a defining moment in his experience, as he felt able to rise above the situation by observing his suffering as it was already in the past, with focus on his future goal. The prisoner who lost faith in the future was a prisoner who was subject to mental and physical decay, and ultimately doomed.

Two additional psychological factors are important in this section. First is the relationship between the Capos and their fellow prisoners. Because the Capos embraced brutality and this behavior was reinforced through preferential treatment from their captors, their delusion of grandeur made them feel psychologically superior to their fellow prisoners. Whenever this promoted minority came into conflict with the degraded majority, the results were explosive. The second prominent psychological concept addressed is that of depersonalization. Frankl explains that the body has fewer inhibitions than the mind. Physical survival was less difficult than psychological survival. Prisoners found the will to survive their experience with dreams of the future, in spite of their constant treatment as having no worth. Even when finally liberated, the impact of being treated as meaningless made their freedom seem like a continued dream as a tool of psychological survival. It was difficult to believe that freedom was their new reality.



"Logotherapy in a Nutshell" (through page 157)

"Logotherapy in a Nutshell" (through page 157) Summary and Analysis

Part two of the book moves to a more clinical style of writing. Frankl mentions he considers himself a psychotherapist rather than psychoanalyst and that his specific approach is deemed logotherapy. He describes logotherapy as less retrospective and introspective than psychoanalysis. Logotherapy is defined as a meaning-centered psychotherapy that focuses on meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in the future. In this approach, the patient is confronted with the meaning of his life, so as to provide an awareness that will allow him or her to overcome weaknesses. As it is derived from the Greek word Logos ("meaning"), Frankl considers it to represent his view that striving to find meaning is a person's primary motivational force.

Man's search for meaning can lead to an aspect of logotherapy known as existential frustration, an aggravation based on the difficulty of determining the meaning of one's existence. Existential frustration can lead to neuroses. Frankl uses the term noogenic neuroses to describe these issues with the dimension of human existence. As noogenic neuroses emerge from existential problems, Frankl concludes logotherapy is the appropriate therapy to confront these psychological conflicts. Logotherapy is considered a means of helping the patient find meaning in his or her life. It is an analytical process that resembles psychoanalysis on some levels. However, it differs, because it considers humans' main concern to be fulfilling a meaning rather than the gratification of drives and instincts.

Positive mental health is based on a balance of tension. According to Frankl, a person's health is not determined by a tensionless state but rather by striving for a worthwhile goal. Noo-dynamics is presented as the alternative to homeostasis. The existential vacuum is defined as the lack of instinct leading to security in decisions, leading mostly to boredom. Sampling his European students, Frankl found a fourth of them suffered from some form of existential vacuum, and this was true for most of American students.

For those afflicted by the existential vacuum, finding the meaning of life is essential to provide a sense of purpose and relieve prevailing boredom and frustration.

To illustrate a person's active search for meaning, Frankl returns to a discussion of Auschwitz, noting the statistical reality that survival was no more than a one in twenty-eight prospect (evidenced by the actual amount of deaths). With this reality, it appeared his life would end nothing would survive him. In this instance, he was confronted with the question as to if his life had meaning. His decision was to honor his life and his work by living out his thoughts, that it was not mere survival that had meaning but the way in which he faced these grim circumstances. He recalls his drive to reconstruct the



manuscript that was confiscated from him upon his imprisonment. This passion, the meaning it had for him, helped him endure the suffering.

Due to the suffering he endured, and because of his ability to find meaning even in such horrible circumstances, Frankl gained tremendous insight into humans' psychological motivations and capabilities. Logotherapy regards responsibility as the essence of existence, meaning that a person needs to determine his or her own meaning of life by answering this question individually in terms of what they want and need. The categorical imperative of logotherapy is "Live life as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"

Logotherapy calls upon the patient to make a determination as to what is right. With this approach, the therapist does not sit in judgment a patient's choices. Rather, it is the role of the therapist to help the patient realize all the potential choices available so that he or she can determine a personal meaning based on their individual circumstances.

According to logotherapy, the meaning of life can be discovered by doing a deed, experiencing something or encountering someone, or by a person's attitude toward suffering. These are explained further. By accomplishing something worthwhile, a person can discover meaning and a sense of purpose through their achievement. The second way of discovering meaning in life, experiencing something or encountering someone, is discussed through the meaning of love, as Frankl believes this is the only way to be fully aware of the true essence of another. Through love, a person is able to thoroughly recognize the traits and abilities of their loved one, and also to see their potential skills. This love not only reveals much about the loved one, but it enables the loved one to actualize his or her potentials. The third way of discovering meaning in life is with regard to suffering. Frankl emphasizes that this is a profound way of discovering meaning. When one realizes that, faced with an unchangeable situation, the only way to turn tragedy into triumph is to change oneself. "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice." Therefore, the central way to discover meaning through suffering is to understand its purpose and to focus one's personal attitudes toward the unpleasant event. However, Frankl is careful to point out that suffering is not something to be sought after as a way of finding meaning. This self-destructive behavior will not produce valid meaning.

Logodrama is presented with an example of a therapy session with a suicidal mother who has lost a young son to death and has another son who is paralyzed. In asking her to envision herself eighty years old and on her deathbed, she is able to see meaning in her life even when considering all the suffering. Moreover, she also is able to see that even a life in short duration, like that of her deceased son, can be much more meaningful than a long life that has not discovered its purpose. The super-meaning is a concept offered that states a person's ability to realize ultimate meaning goes beyond finite intellectual abilities. Life's transitoriness describes things, which seem to take meaning away from human life. Logotherapy frames life's transitoriness in an optimistic way that embraces achievements and suffering alike.



Logotherapy is discussed as a technique, with the central concepts of "hyper-intention" and "hyper-reflection" described. Hyper-intention refers to the premise that a forced intention makes impossible what is forcibly wished, as in a man determined to demonstrate his sexual potency will be very unlikely to succeed. Hyper-reflection is excessive attention to particular thoughts or behaviors, an unnatural focus that leads to unhealthy outcomes. Logotherapy bases its technique on "paradoxical intention," the fact that fear creates what one is afraid of and hypertension makes impossible what one wishes. Paradoxical intention was introduced by Frankl as early as 1939 and is illustrated with several examples of patients' behavior. For instance, Frankl tells of an individual who was very self-conscious about his perspiration problem, to the point that it caused him severe anxiety.

Based on the concept of paradoxical intention, Frankl advised him to focus on sweating as much as he could when he got around other people, and within a week, his problem was substantially cured. Frankl goes on to say that this technique has been applied even to obsessive-compulsive neuroses of the most severe degree. While often a short term solution to the specific disorder, cases are cited that exceed more than 20 years in length, proving that there can be long lasting and even permanent cures through this method.

Frankl continues his critique of psychoanalysis by using the phrase "pan-determinism" to refer to the view that people are incapable of taking a stand toward any condition. Based on his experiences, Frankl believes humans are completely self-determining as active decision makers in their behavior and thoughts. As his psychiatric credo, he offers the belief that no matter what a person's psychological disorder, he or she may retain the dignity of a human being. He dispels the popular belief that people are mechanistic creatures of stimulus and response, and instead are humans with the intellectual and psychological freedom to determine their existence. "In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions."

This section is considerably different from the previous writing. Instead of writing about specific examples and general experiences in a concentration camp, Frankl uses his psychiatric expertise to more fully define his concept of logotherapy and its elements. Frankl had developed the concept of logotherapy prior to his imprisonment (the reader is aware of this because mention is made of the manuscript that was confiscated from him upon being put in the concentration camp). Many terms are defined and concepts related to logotherapy are explained with an emphasis given on the concept of choices. Frankl stresses man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in a person's life. This disputes other theories that regard search for meaning as a human psychological defense mechanism for reality. By mentioning surveys that note an overwhelming number of people respond that man needs something for the sake of living, Frankl tells the reader that his belief is widely embraced by people throughout the world.

Frankl acknowledges that searching for meaning may cause frustration and psychological tension. However, he believes it is worth it because it can lead to a person's ultimate fulfillment. He also believes it is a far healthier alternative to not seeking meaning, noting boredom can manifest itself in depression, aggression, and addiction. Through this perspective, Frankl again draws a stark contrast between logotherapy and traditional psychoanalysis. Whereas logotherapy sees people as inquisitive beings fundamentally in search of meaning in their lives, psychoanalysis perceives people as behaving in response to unconscious psychological forces.

Perhaps the most important aspect presented in this section is Frankl's discussion on the three ways of finding meaning. According to this theory, individual and situational differences will provide the circumstances for personal enlightenment on one of these dimensions. The first way of finding meaning is creating a work or doing a deed. Frankl comments that this method is a basic concept that does not require much elaboration. An individual can accomplish any number of things that will lead to a personal discovery of meaning. It may be the creation of an artistic work or scholarly idea that takes on widespread appeal or it can be a personal action known only to the individual. The meaning is derived on the value found by the individual through this accomplishment, not necessarily or directly based on how this accomplishment is viewed by others.

The second way of finding meaning is stated as experiencing something or encountering someone. Frankl relates this most strongly to the concept of love, as he believes "love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his or her personality." The third method of finding meaning, through discovering value in suffering, is presented as perhaps the most powerful route. This method is championed because of the high level of personal strength and determination required to find meaning in suffering, and Frankl's own experiences with this method lend a first-hand account of how fulfilling this accomplishment can be.



"The Case for a Tragic Optimism" (through page 179)

"The Case for a Tragic Optimism" (through page 179) Summary and Analysis

This chapter is written as an addendum to Frankl's original manuscript. Building upon the conclusion of part two of the book, this section focuses attention on the method of finding meaning through suffering. Tragic optimism is the concept that a person is genuinely optimistic even in the face of extremely negative circumstances. In logotherapy, this is represented with the "tragic triad" which consists of pain; guilt and death. Each element of the tragic triad provides a stimulus that can produce immense grief. However, logotherapy does not regard humans as simply animals prone to a given stimulus-response mentality. When confronted with the worst of human conditions, Frankl contends that keeping an optimistic mindset allows people the opportunity to turn suffering into achievement, improve oneself, and act to take responsibility. This must be an authentic choice actively pursued by an individual in the midst of tragedy. In order to be effective, this choice must be fully understood and embraced by individuals. Optimism cannot be simply forced into one's mind across all situations.

Frankl writes that one must have a reason to be happy, but once this reason is found happiness will occur automatically. When this happiness is achieved, individuals will have developed the necessary mechanism for dealing with difficult circumstances and suffering. Conversely, those who feel their search for meaning has been in vain may find themselves confronted with deep depression, perhaps resulting in a fatal condition. Frankl again uses examples from the concentration camps of men who gave up hope and shortly after would be dead. He uses the term "give-up-itis" to describe this psychological reaction and corresponding behavior. A parallel is drawn to people who take comfort in drug use, as this is a resigned behavior of self-indulgence in the larger context of feeling meaninglessness in the world. Specifically, Frankl proposes that depression, aggression, and addiction are due to the existential vacuum previously discussed in the book.

Because suicide often occurs when people find a lack of hope and meaning in their lives, Frankl discusses how to use logotherapy to help suicidal individuals find a sense of purpose. He recalls his experience in Austria's state hospital where he estimates he worked with more than twelve thousand severely depressed people, most of whom had made an attempt at suicide. In the majority of these situations, people told Frankl that they were very glad the suicide attempt had failed, that they had since found a profound meaning in their lives. Frankl would use these as examples to counsel others considering suicide to provide them with the optimism necessary to inspire the will to live.



According to logotherapy, meaning is a tangible down to earth concept. Frankl reiterates the three ways for people to arrive at meaning: accomplishing something, experiencing something or encountering someone, or turning a personal tragedy into triumph. It is noted that the third way is perhaps the most important avenue to meaning. An example is given of a man who became paralyzed in a diving accident, who used this event to find his true meaning of attending school to become a psychologist with the realization that his suffering will allow him the ability to help others in the future. When such suffering is unavoidable, profound meaning can be attained by choosing one's attitude toward this suffering. This is related back to the principles of the tragic triad, pain, guilt, and death - elements of suffering that can be overcome in a way that leads to meaning.

This chapter addresses the question of how a person can maintain optimism even under life's most tragic circumstances. Although the book as a whole reflects this notion through Frankl's personal experiences in the concentration camps and his ability to find the meaning of his life through this suffering, this chapter does a good job of expanding the concept further. Specifically, the introduction of examples faced by Frankl's patients illustrates for the reader that suffering takes many forms. Similarly, these case studies are presented as success stories, as Frankl reveals that in spite of the various degrees of personal pain and loss, logotherapy was able to provide these individuals with a context for understanding this reality and finding a genuine meaning of life through this perspective.

The emphasis in this section is an individual's psychological choice to make the best of a given situation, particularly when faced with unpleasant conditions in which the individual can exert little control. Frankl uses the term "tragic optimism" to represent an authentic outlook of optimism even when tragic circumstances occur. However, while optimism can be a very effective tool in finding meaning in tragedy, Frankl stresses that it is not something that can be forced arbitrarily. In this respect, Frankl compares it to the act of laughing - noting that it cannot be genuine unless a person finds real humor in a joke or situation. Meaning of life and corresponding happiness is not something that occurs by force or by default. It can only be attained when the reason for one's existence or suffering is genuinely embraced through an optimistic sense of searching and purpose. Overall, this is an inspiring way to close the book, adding a great deal of insight on finding meaning through suffering, augmenting the spirit and content of the original writing.



Characters

Dr. Viktor Frankl

Capos

SS Officers

SS Commander



Objects/Places

Concentration Camps

These places of imprisonment are fundamental to Frankl's description of human suffering. They are most relevant due to their impact on the human psyche rather than as specific places. Hence, they are discussed collectively to reflect the human state of mind and behavioral responses to the captivity and brutality that was common to all the concentration camps, although Auschwitz, Dachau, and an unnamed Bavarian camp receive individual mention.

Prison Life

This is a concept frequently illustrated throughout the first section of the book. Imprisonment in the concentration camps presented a somber reality for the prisoners, one in which undernourishment, beatings, overcrowded sleeping quarters, and death were in abundance. Prisoners' individuality and past accomplishments were regarded as worthless, and prison life constantly reinforced that no value was placed on the lives of the prisoners.

Three Phases of Psychological Reactions

Based on the nature of their imprisonment, three psychological reactions were common to all prisoners, which occurred in a sequential manner - shock, apathy, and readjusting to freedom. Each concept is given significant attention throughout the writing.

Logotherapy

A meaning-centered psychological approach designed to help people accomplish what Frankl believes is the primary source of human motivation - finding meaning in life.

Ways of Discovering Meaning

According to Frankl's theory of logotherapy, individuals can find meaning in his or her life by doing a deed, experiencing something or encountering someone, or by a person's attitude toward suffering. The specific avenue to meaning depends upon the individual mindsets, histories, and choices of different people. Hence, there is no one method of finding meaning in life, and no category can be said to be the most fulfilling avenue for all people.



Undernourishment

A vivid reality of the concentration camps, prisoners were given only minimal food that was especially insufficient for the painstaking labor they were forced to perform. Daily allowances of food consisted of 10 ? ounces of bread and 1 ? pints of thin soup, although often the prisoners received even less. Given the undernourishment, the prisoners watch themselves and each other disintegrate into emaciated beings that resembled little more than a collection of skeletal bones, often leading to death. This created a primitive desire for food of which mental life centered.

Death in Teheran

This parable is used several times by Frankl to illustrate the concept that fate is often beyond the control of individual actions. The story tells of a servant who is frightened upon meeting Death, and begs his master for a horse so he may ride to Teheran to avoid death. However, Death had planned to meet the man in Teheran that very evening. This reveals that humans may not be able to control all things, but what is important is to choose honorable attitudes and behaviors toward those things that cannot be changed.

Choice of Action

A central theme of the book, specifically humans have the psychological freedom to select their own thoughts and behaviors no matter what variables define a situation. Frankl uses the experiences in the concentration camps to illustrate humans have a choice of action, and are much more than stimulus-response animals. Frankl emphasizes that there were enough heroic examples to indicate that even in conditions of terrible psychic and physical stress humans control the independence of their mind, and are capable of overcoming whatever negativity is thrust on them.

Existential Frustration

Human's search for meaning is a fundamental motive of their existence. However, meaning is not something that comes easily or automatically to people. It requires a deep personal understanding of one's own history and future goals in relation to the larger context of their environment. This search can be an aggravating process that raises difficult questions and causes frustration.

Noogenic Neuroses

These neuroses are distinct from traditional psychogenic neuroses because instead of psychological origins the origins are rooted in human existence. Logotherapy is viewed as the most appropriate therapy for noogenic neuroses.



Existential Vacuum

The existential vacuum is the inability to find meaning in life, leading to boredom and distress. Without discovering meaning in life, a person is relegated to living in this perpetual state. Frankl attributes many psychological afflictions such as depression, aggression, and addiction to the existential vacuum.

Tragic Optimism

Tragic optimism is the concept of genuine optimism even in the face of extremely negative circumstances. In logotherapy, this is represented with the "tragic triad" of pain, guilt and death. While each element of the tragic triad can cause immense grief, Frankl contends that keeping an optimistic mindset allows people the opportunity to turn suffering into achievement, improve oneself, and act to take responsibility. Optimism cannot be simply forced into one's mind across all situations.



Themes

Choosing One's Feelings

The notion that individuals have the psychological freedom to determine their thoughts and feelings is fundamental to the philosophy of Frankl's writing. He emphasizes that psychological reactions are not determined for people by any stimuli, no matter how powerful or devastating. Examples detailing the horrific experiences of imprisonment in concentration camps are provided to reinforce this theme. Specifically, Frankl illustrates how it is possible to be continually exposed to a negative environment of death and despair, yet still find a means of discovering meaning in this suffering. Even when death appears inevitable, people possess the inner ability to reflect positively on the things they have accomplished in their lifetime and to put in perspective the current meaning of their suffering. In this respect, individuals' psychological reactions are proven more than a mere expression of physical and sociological conditions.

This is not a phenomenon exclusive to those who suffered as prisoners in the concentration camps. It applies to all types and degrees of individual suffering. Therefore, a central theme that humans are psychologically capable of choosing what will become of them mentally and spiritually is a guiding philosophy of the book. This is not to say choosing a healthy outlook or finding meaning under such circumstances is an automatic or easy process. Indeed, many people will succumb to negative feelings and thoughts when confronted with a negative reality. However, humans are psychologically greater than to be defined by simple stimulus-response behavior. This premise is presented theoretically and supported by relevant instances of people choosing a path of optimism and finding meaning under conditions of suffering.

The Need to Discover the Meaning of One's Existence

This theme is important because it expands the philosophy of meaning beyond circumstances of suffering. Frankl does not suggest that the search for meaning begins only when individuals find themselves in difficult situations. Rather, he regards this quest as a driving force within the life of every person. Consequently, the writing suggests that people living under relatively pleasant and placid circumstances will still be prone to great psychological discomfort if they perceive their life to exist without any particular meaning. Just as individuals have difficulty finding meaning under the most unpleasant of conditions, so too can people struggle to find meaning in everyday life. This is because the meaning of one's life is strictly linked to their individual world, and that an existence that provides clarity and profound meaning for one person cannot necessarily be said to do so for another. Moreover, the search for the meaning of one's life is a dramatic undertaking that requires a deep understanding of one's own fundamentals and philosophies. It is a process of becoming and of individual discovery.



Ways of Discovering Meaning

As it is discussed that meaning in life is highly contingent upon individual psychology and circumstances, it is shown that meaning can be derived from many variables. However, the book presents a distinct theme that these variables can be understood only through three specific contexts. One can do a deed, experience something or encounter someone, or exhibit a certain attitude toward suffering. Frankl seems to favor the third method, as it receives the bulk of attention through supporting examples of the concentration camps. Perhaps this is because of the difficulty inherent in turning tragedy into triumph, requiring an ability to engage in deep introspection and change personal philosophies. Yet Frankl is careful to point out that meaning does require suffering, and can be found through either of the other two avenues.

Style

Point of View

Frankl uses an autobiographical style of writing to effectively illustrate his main theme, that humans have a fundamental need to discover meaning within their lives. The writing begins by discussing Frankl's personal experiences as a prisoner in the concentration camps. He reflects back in time often writing in the past tense to relay his feelings and recall his behaviors as he endured this ordeal. Through this method, he provides first-hand accounts to vividly reveal a deplorable environment of suffering and death. Although told from his own point of view, Frankl notes that his experiences and perceptions were common among many prisoners. After using the autobiographical style to create a foundation, Frankl moves to a more clinical style of writing where he interjects his professional beliefs of human psychology in the third person. In doing so, Frankl is able to provide a tangible life for his theoretical basis that individuals can find meaning even when confronted with a miserable existence beyond their choosing. Utilizing this point of view also helps bolster his credibility to make claims about the capabilities of mental processes and the concept of individual choice even under conditions of extreme duress.

Setting

First published in 1946, this book was intended to be published anonymously as a representation of the horrors many endured in the concentration camps during the recently ended war. Hence, the vast majority of the physical setting described by the book is through the perspective of a prisoner in a time of war. The environment is depicted as mostly depressing due to the lack of adequate human conditions. The reader gains a sense of overcrowded huts with insufficient space for the prisoners, minimally functioning showers where icicles hung from the ceiling, and an electric fence surrounding a desolate area where the prisoners were kept. This setting continues to be employed even when the writing shifts to a more clinical style, as continued references are made to the experiences in the concentration camps. Through the vivid descriptions of the physical setting, Frankl also illustrates the psychological setting for the prisoners. In a time and culture where they were regarded as inferior based exclusively on their heritage, the psychological phases following admission into the camp, when well entrenched in camp routine, and following release and liberation are well documented to show the range of reactions that include shock, despair, apathy, and inequality.

Language and Meaning

Although originally intended to be published anonymously, Frankl eventually decided to apply his name to the manuscript because he believed it would add more credibility to the accounts. This decision had a major implication for the language of the book, as



Frankl depicted his experiences in a format reminiscent of a journal. The brutal conditions of physical and psychological suffering took on a human form as Frankl discussed his own personal treatment and feelings throughout this ordeal. The use of such autobiographical language allows the reader to form a distinct picture of the environment, as well as empathize with the plight of these individuals. Frankl does not merely describe his personal ordeal, he shares the best and worst of his thoughts and feelings, which allows the reader to trace the psychology of this traumatic experience through the phases of shock, apathy, and freedom. With this language, the reader is able to personally identify with the injustice, despair, fear, and sense of hopelessness until then Frankl inspires the reader with a revealing description of how he found meaning under these conditions. Using this style provides a strong foundation for Frankl to later introduce a detailed discussion of psychological theories and principles. If the book was presented strictly in a textbook format, it would lose the imagery and integrity that lies in its personal account.

Structure

Man's Search for Meaning is composed of three primary sections clearly delineated: experiences in a concentration camp, logotherapy in a nutshell, and the case for a tragic optimism. The book also contains a preface authored by psychologist Gordon Allport, a preface to the 1984 edition added by Frankl to the original manuscript in 1983, and an extensive bibliography of logotherapy. The writing is designed to first provide the reader with the perspective of an environment many would consider hopeless. It then moves to explain how the search for meaning was possible under these circumstances by moving to a discussion of the psychological elements and cognitive processing that form the basis of logotherapy. As logotherapy is defined, Frankl revisits some of the earlier examples to illuminate the theoretical aspects presented in this second section. Part two concludes with a discussion on the method of finding meaning in life through suffering. Part three, the case for a tragic optimism, provides a nice segue, as it explores in detail the necessary elements needed to find meaning in tragic circumstances. This final section reflects an addition to the original manuscript, added in 1983 from a lecture Frankl delivered on logotherapy at that time. It provides an inspiring conclusion to a book that highlights the profound greatness humans are capable of even in the worst situations.



Quotes

"There were still napve prisoners among us who asked, to the amusement of the more seasoned ones who were there as helpers, if they could not keep a wedding ring, a medal or a good luck piece. No one could yet grasp the fact that everything would be taken away." Page 32

"At that moment I saw the plain truth and did what marked the culminating point of the first phase of my psychological reaction: I struck out my whole former life." Page 33

"An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior." Page 38

"I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in a positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way - an honorable way - in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment." Page 57

"We had come, as quickly as possible, to a camp which did not have a 'chimney' - unlike Auschwitz. We laughed and cracked jokes in spite of, and during, all we had to go through in the next few hours." Page 65

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Pg 86

"Instead of taking the camp's difficulties as a test of their inner strength, they did not take their life seriously and despised it as something of no consequence. They preferred to close their eyes and to live in the past. Life for such people became meaningless." Page 93

"When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." Page 99

"I said that each of us had to ask himself what irreplaceable losses he had suffered up to then. I speculated that for most of them these losses had really been few. Whoever was still alive had reason for hope. Health, family, happiness, professional abilities, fortune, position in society - all these were things that could be achieved again or restored. After all, we still had all our bones intact." Page 103



"There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life."
Page 126

"One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it." Page 131

Topics for Discussion

Discuss how the author's use of his personal experiences to illustrate his theory affected your perception of the writing.

Agree or disagree with Frankl's premise that the search for meaning is human's primary psychological motivation.

Which do you believe was the most psychologically stressful situation presented throughout the book?

Discuss Frankl's belief that joy and suffering are relative concepts. Provide relevant examples to support your discussion.

Based on Frankl's assertion that there are three general ways to discover meaning, discuss which you believe would prove most powerful in your life.

Discuss how logotherapy differs from traditional psychoanalysis. Which approach do you favor?

Explain how being released from the concentration camps caused psychological stress for the prisoners.

Discuss Frankl's use of the parable of Death in Tehran to illustrate the role of fate in the prisoners' experience in the concentration camp.

Give examples to illustrate how paradoxical intention can result in both healthy and negative behaviors.