

## **Man's Search for Meaning Summary by Viktor Frankl**

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.

### VIKTOR FRANKL: Man's Search for Meaning Excerpts

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) was professor of psychiatry and neurology at the university of Vienna Medical School and is the founder of logotherapy, the psychological therapy based on the idea that human beings must find a meaning to their lives in order to function. It is based on Nietzsche's dictum "He who has a why to live for, can bear with almost any how." Frankl spent three years in Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz. His entire family was exterminated by the Nazis. In this selection Frankl reflects on the search for meaning in the concentration camp.

What did the prisoner dream about most frequently? Of bread, cake, cigarettes, and nice warm baths. The lack of having these simple desires satisfied led him to seek wish-fulfillment in dreams. Whether these dreams did any good is another matter; the dreamer had to wake from them to the reality of camp life, and to the terrible contrast between that and his dream illusions.

I shall never forget how I was roused one night by the groans of a fellow prisoner, who threw himself about in his sleep, obviously having a horrible nightmare. Since I had always been especially sorry for people who suffered from fearful dreams or deliria, I wanted to wake the poor man. Suddenly I drew back the hand which was ready to shake him, frightened at the thing I was about to do. At that moment I became intensely conscious of the fact that no dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality of the camp which surrounded us, and to which I was about to recall him ....

When the last layers of subcutaneous fat had vanished, and we looked like skeletons disguised with skin and rags, we could watch our bodies beginning to devour themselves. The organism digested its own protein, and the muscles disappeared. Then the body had no powers of resistance left. One after another the members of the little community in our hut died ....

In attempting this psychological presentation and a psychopathological explanation of the typical characteristics of a concentration camp inmate, I may give the impression that the human being is completely and unavoidably influenced by his surroundings. (In this case the surroundings being the unique structure of camp life, which forced the prisoner to conform his conduct to a certain set pattern.) But what about human liberty? Is there no spiritual freedom in regard to behavior and reaction to any given surroundings? Is that theory true which would have us believe that man is no more than a product of many conditional and environmental factors-be they of a biological, psychological or sociological nature? Is man but an accidental product of these? Most important, do the prisoners' reactions to the singular world of the concentration camp prove that man cannot escape the influences of his surroundings? Does man have no choice of action in the face of such circumstances?

We can answer these questions from experience as well as on principle. The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

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.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

Seen from this point of view, the mental reactions of the inmates of a concentration camp must seem more to us than the mere expression of certain physical and sociological conditions. Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Dostoevski said once, "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is

this spiritual freedom-which cannot be taken away-that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art, or nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in man's attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity-even under the most difficult circumstances-to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forego the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.

Do not think that these considerations are unworldly and too far removed from real life. It is true that only a few people are capable of reaching such high moral standards. Of the prisoners only a few kept their full inner liberty and obtained those values which their suffering afforded, but even one such example is sufficient proof that man's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate. Such men are not only in concentration camps. Everywhere man is confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through his own suffering ....

A man who let himself decline because he could not see any future goal found himself occupied with retrospective thoughts. In a different connection, we have already spoken of the tendency there was to look into the past, to help make the present, with all its horrors, less real. But in robbing the present of its reality there

lay a certain danger. It became easy to overlook the opportunities to make something positive of camp life, opportunities which really did exist. Regarding our "provisional existence" as unreal was in itself an important factor in causing the prisoners to lose their hold on life; everything in a way became pointless. Such people forgot that often it is just such an exceptionally difficult external situation which gives man the opportunity to grow spiritually beyond himself. 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.

Naturally only a few people were capable of reaching great spiritual heights. But a few were given the chance to attain human greatness even through their apparent worldly failure and death, an accomplishment which in ordinary circumstances they would never have achieved. To the others of us, the mediocre and the half-hearted, the words of Bismarck could be applied: "Life is like being at the dentist. You always think that the worst is still to come, and yet it is over already." Varying this, we could say that most men in a concentration camp believed that the real opportunities of life had passed. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners.

Any attempt at fighting the camp's psychopathological influence on the prisoner by psychotherapeutic or psychohygienic methods had to aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out to him a future goal to which he could look forward. Instinctively some of the prisoners attempted to find one on their own. It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future-sub specie aeternitatis. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task. ...

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future-his future-was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment-not for ourselves, which

would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. If this crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sick-bay or to do anything to help himself. He simply gave up. There he remained, lying in his own excreta, and nothing bothered him any more.

I once had a dramatic demonstration of the close link between the loss of faith in the future and this dangerous giving up. F--, my senior block warden, a fairly well-known composer and librettist, confided in me one day: "I would like to tell you something, Doctor. I have had a strange dream. A voice told me that I could wish for something, that I should only say what I wanted to know, and all my questions would be answered. What do you think I asked? That I would like to know when the war would be over for me. You know what I mean, Doctor-for me! I wanted to know when we, when our camp, would be liberated and our sufferings come to an end."

"And when did you have this dream?" I asked.

"In February, 1945," he answered. It was then the beginning of March.

"What did your dream voice answer?"

Furtively he whispered to me, "March thirtieth."

When F-- told me about his dream, he was still full of hope and convinced that the voice of his dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer, the war news which reached our camp made it appear very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March twenty-ninth, F-- suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March thirtieth, the day his prophecy had told him that the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March thirty-first, he was dead. To all outward appearances, he had died of typhus.



Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man-his courage and hope, or lack of them-and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. The ultimate cause of my friend's death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his body's resistance against the latent typhus infection. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body fell victim to illness-and thus the voice of his dream was right after all.

The observations of this one case and the conclusion drawn from them are in accordance with something that was drawn to my attention by the chief doctor of our concentration camp. The death rate in the week between Christmas, 1944, and New Year's, 1945, increased in camp beyond all previous experience. In his opinion, the explanation for this increase did not lie in the harder working conditions or the deterioration of our food supplies or a change of weather or new epidemics. It was simply that the majority of the prisoners had lived in the naive hope that they would be home again by Christmas. As the time drew near and there was no encouraging news, the prisoners lost courage and disappointment overcame them. This had a dangerous influence on their powers of resistance and a great number of them died.

As we said before, any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how," could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why-an aim-for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, "I have nothing to expect from life anymore." What sort of answer can one give to that?

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it

did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. "Life" does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response. Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Sometimes man may be required simply to accept fate, to bear his cross. Every situation is distinguished by its uniqueness, and there is always only one right answer to the problem posed by the situation at hand.

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.

For us, as prisoners, these thoughts were not speculations far removed from reality. They were the only thoughts that could be of help to us. They kept us from despair, even when there seemed to be no chance of coming out of it alive. Long ago we had passed the stage of asking what was the meaning of life, a naive query which understands life as the attaining of some aim through the active creation of something of value. For us, the meaning of life embraced the wider cycles of life and death, of suffering and of dying.

Once the meaning of suffering had been revealed to us, we refused to minimize or alleviate the camp's tortures by ignoring them or harboring false illusions and entertaining artificial optimism. Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs. We had realized its hidden opportunities for achievement, the opportunities which caused the poet Rilke to write, "Wie viel ist aufzuleiden/" (How much suffering there is to get through!) Rilke spoke of "getting through suffering" as others would talk of "getting through work." There was plenty of suffering for us to get through. Therefore, it was necessary to face up to the full amount of suffering, trying to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum. But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer. Only very few realized that. Shamefacedly some confessed occasionally that they had wept, like the comrade who answered my question of how he had gotten over his edema, by confessing, "I have wept it out of my system." ...

Freedom ... is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.