

Application of Frankl's Tragic Optimism in Nigerian situation

Professor David Adebayo Oluwole

Department of Counselling & Human Development Studies

University of Ibadan, Ibadan

08034105253

daoluwoledr@gmail.com

<https://www.positivepsychology.org.ng/>

Introduction

- Today, Nigeria though has all semblances of a true nation, however, anarchy pervades the mind of almost everybody.
- In the last 20 years, there are countless policy somersaults, unstable economy, reckless and careless activities of our leaders which aggravate apprehension of hopelessness.
- Poor-verty, impoverishment, hunger and hopelessness were reinforced by increase in unemployment, insecurity, massive corruption, hunger, mismanaged economy and unhindered hyperinflation.
- This resultant effect is damaged mind inform of negative coping strategies and poor psychological well-being. A prominent coping mechanism applied by many Nigerians is toxic positivity. This will be addressed later in the course of this lecture.

- **Viktor Frankl and his ordeals (1905-1997)**
- Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist of the 20th century, established the discipline of logotherapy. He was a survivor of the Holocaust and authored the highly successful book, "Man's Search for Meaning."
- Viktor Emil Frankl was born in Vienna, Austria on March 26, 1905. He obtained his MD and PhD degrees from the University of Vienna, specializing in psychiatry and neurology with a particular emphasis on suicide and depression.
- In 1942, Frankl, along with his parents, wife, and brother, was apprehended and transported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

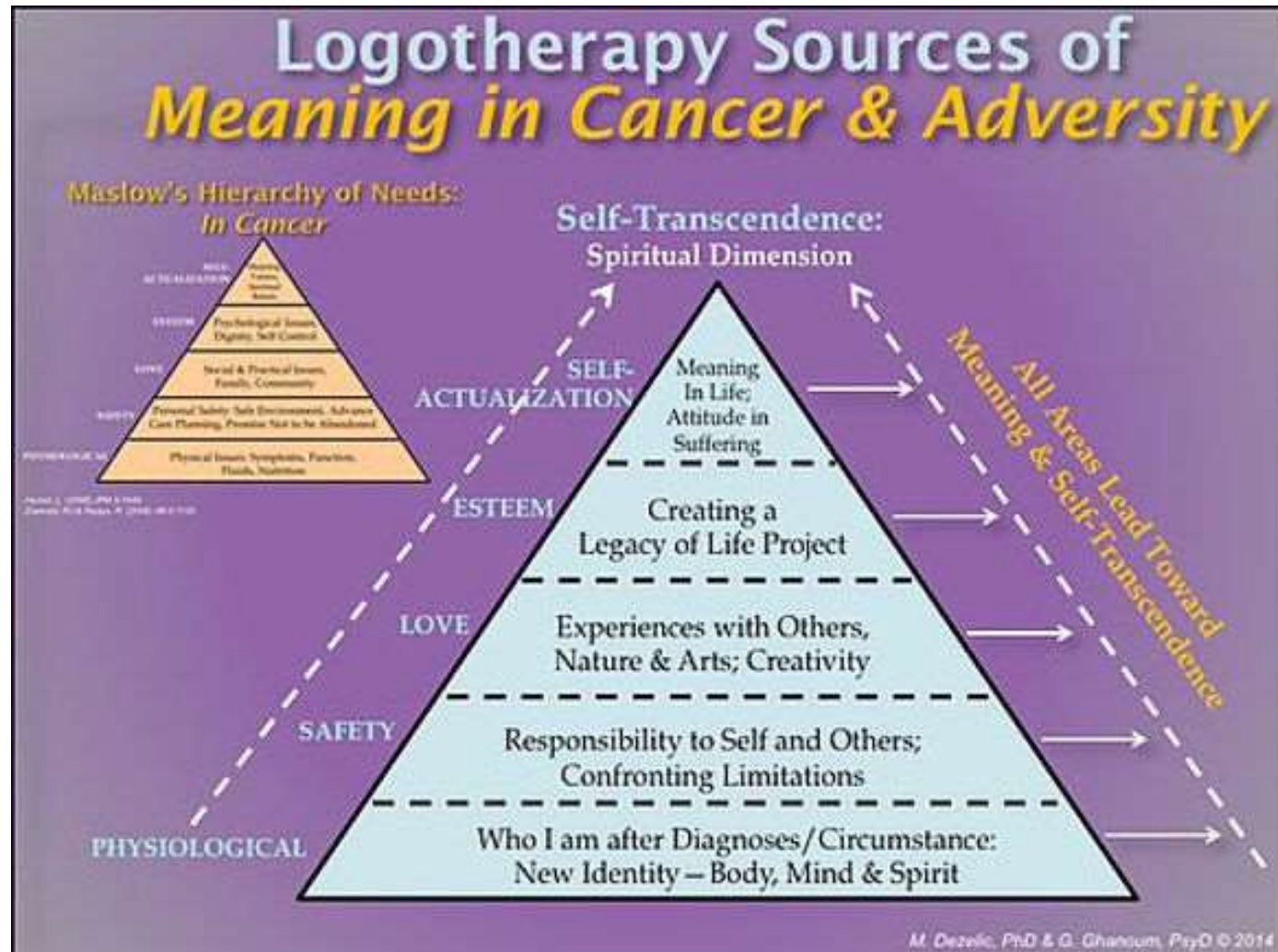
Viktor Frankl (1905-1997)

- It was in Auschwitz that his brother perished and his mother was murdered.
- Frankl's spouse passed away at Bergen-Belsen.
- In 1945, upon the liberation of Frankl's camp, he received the devastating news of the demise of all his close relatives, except for his sister who had relocated to Australia.
- Frankl utilized his firsthand encounters in the concentration camps to formulate his theory of logotherapy, which is occasionally denoted as the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy" due to Frankl succeeding Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler.

Logotherapy

- Frankl posited that even in the midst of dehumanizing and atrocious circumstances, life still possessed inherent significance and that suffering served a specific objective.
- Frankl believed that in the face of extreme physical circumstances, individuals could find solace and resilience by tapping into their spiritual essence, enabling them to endure seemingly insurmountable conditions.

Frankl takes Maslow's concept a step further, and is often quoting Goethe's aphorism: "If we take people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat them as if they were what they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming" (Graber, 2004, p. 68).



Logotherapy (Cont'd)

- Frankl utilized his firsthand encounters in the concentration camps to formulate his theory of logotherapy, which is occasionally denoted as the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy" due to Frankl succeeding Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler
- Freud essentially postulated a will to pleasure as the root of all human motivation
- Adler a will to power.
- Logotherapy postulates **a will to meaning**

The Six Basic Assumptions Logotherapy

- **Body, Mind, and Spirit.** The human being is an entity that consists of a body (soma), mind (psyche), and spirit (noos). Frankl argued that we have a body and mind, but the spirit is what we are, or our essence. Frankl's theory was not based on religion or theology, but often had parallels to these.
- **Life Has Meaning in All Circumstances.** Frankl believed that life has meaning in all circumstances, even the most miserable ones. This means that even when situations seem objectively terrible, there is a higher level of order that involves meaning.
- **Humans Have a Will to Meaning.** Logotherapy proposes that humans have a will to meaning, which means that meaning is our primary motivation for living and acting, and allows us to endure pain and suffering. This is viewed as differing from the will to achieve power and pleasure.
- **Freedom to Find Meaning.** Frankl argued that in all circumstances, individuals have the freedom to access that will to find meaning. This is based on his experiences of pain and suffering and choosing his attitude in a situation that he could not change.
- **Meaning of the Moment.** The fifth assumption argues that for decisions to be meaningful, individuals must respond to the demands of daily life in ways that match the values of society or their own conscience.
- **Individuals Are Unique.** Frankl believed that every individual is unique and irreplaceable.

Conscience

- He refers to conscience as a "pre-reflective ontological self-understanding" or "the wisdom of the heart," "more sensitive than reason can ever be sensible." (1975, p. 39) It is conscience that "sniffs out" that which gives our lives meaning.
- He puts it in no uncertain terms: "... (B)eing human is being responsible -- existentially responsible, responsible for one's own existence." (1975, p. 26) Conscience is intuitive and highly personalized. It refers to a real person in a real situation, and cannot be reduced to simple "universal laws." It must be lived.

- **Attitude**

- Frankl believed that humans are motivated by something called a "will to meaning," which is the desire to find meaning in life.
- Victor Frankl Quotes: **“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.”**
- According to Frankl, (t)here 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, and existence restricted by external forces.... Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. (1963, p. 106)

- **Instinct**

- Each one of us is born with a primal instinct to survive. Throughout the ages, from the beginning of time – this has been clearly evidenced by human evolution. Of course, we know instinctually that survival is vital to the propagation of life, any form of life on earth, therefore it must perpetuate itself, even and inevitably, in the face of incredible adversities.

- **Tragic optimism**

- Frankl (2004) talks about a *Tragic Optimism*, which mainly suggests that “one is, and remains, optimistic in spite of the “tragic triad,” as it is called in logotherapy, a triad which consists of those aspects of human experience which may be circumscribed by:

- ❖ **(1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death.”**

- In other words, it advocates a certain way of living and suggests that life involves three inevitable kinds of tragedy, pain and suffering, guilt (because we are free to make choices and are responsible for the impact and consequences of those choices), and death (a knowing that our life is transient).
- He acknowledges that it is hard to find meaning in the face of such tragedy. However, if we do not, then our sense of meaninglessness manifests in our experiences of depression, aggression and addiction. (pg. 139 – 141)

Tragic optimism (Cont'd)

- Tragic optimism helps you grow as a person in numerous ways. Life comes with tragedy built into it; even if you live a very charmed life, you'll still get sick, lose loved ones, experience disappointments, and someday die. On top of that, there are wars, pandemics, economic downturns, and other societal ills that can affect you.
- When you stop running from these things and accept them as a natural part of life, you can begin to take responsible action to improve your mental health.

- **Tragic Optimism vs. Toxic Positivity**
- Tragic optimism encourages holistic acceptance of life, while toxic positivity insists you stuff down any feelings of pain or sadness. Toxic positivity is a slippery slope that can lead to false hope while tragic optimism enables real healing and growth.
- **Acceptance vs. avoidance**
- **Authenticity vs. inaccuracy**
- **Depth vs. surface**
- **Tragic optimism helps us take control of our lives by recognizing our own potential within any context—no matter how difficult it may be.** On the other hand, toxic positivity can keep us from doing anything meaningful that could lead to a better life for ourselves and others.

Recommendations on How to Practise Tragic Optimism

- Frankl believed that it was possible to turn suffering into achievement and accomplishment. He viewed guilt as an opportunity to change oneself for the better and life transitions as the chance to take responsible action.
- When you approach life with openness and realism, you have a far greater chance of maintaining an abiding sense of [equanimity](#) and hope.

Recommendations

- Keep these tips in mind as you seek to become a tragic optimist:
- **Creating something:** [Creating something](#) such as art gives you a sense of purpose, which can add meaning to your life.
- **Developing relationships:** [Social support](#) can help you to develop more of a sense of meaning.
- **Finding purpose in pain:** If you are going through something negative, try to find a purpose in it. Even if this is a bit of mental trickery, it will help to see you through.

Recommendations

- **Understanding that life is not fair:** There is nobody keeping score, and you will not necessarily be dealt a fair hand. However, life can always have meaning, even in the worst of situations.
- **Embracing your freedom to find meaning:** Remember that you are always free to make meaning out of your situation; nobody can take that away from you.
- **Focusing on others:** Try to focus outside of yourself. This may help you to stop feeling mentally "stuck" on a situation in your own life.
- **Accepting the worst:** When you're prepared to accept the worst, it reduces the power that it has over you.

Recommendations

- **Learn from pain.** Traumatic events cause sorrow, but they can also make you stronger in unique and powerful ways. When you go through something hard for the first time, it might feel overwhelming and impossible. Still, with each experience, you become a little stronger and better able to withstand the challenges of life.
- **Practice gratitude.** Tragic optimism means recognizing both good times and bad times are opportunities for gratefulness. The impermanence of human life is a double-edged sword—while hard times can't last forever, neither can good ones. To achieve self-transcendence and true contentment, realize both positive and negative events can add up to a good life. Be grateful for what either type of experience can teach you.

Recommendations (Cont'd)

- **Prepare for ups and downs.** Human existence is synonymous with transitoriness. There'll be many ups and downs on your journey from birth to death. Give yourself grace if you're struggling through hard times. No one can feel hopeful and happy all the time. Practice [mindfulness](#) and self-compassion as you move through times of abundance and periods of pain.
- **Seek meaning.** The discovery of meaning is what makes post-traumatic growth possible. If you can latch onto a personal meaning of life, you can remain humble in happy times and hopeful in hard ones.
- Toxic positivity tells you to seek out ways to mount an intervention into any negative experiences or feelings. Tragic optimism insists mining these for meaning can prove more rewarding than you ever would've expected.

Recommendations (Cont'd)

- Logotherapy is aimed at helping you to make better use of your "spiritual" resources to withstand adversity. Three techniques intended to help with this process include dereflection, paradoxical intention, and Socratic dialogue.
- **Dereflection: Dereflection is aimed at helping you focus away from yourself and toward other people allowing you to become "whole" and to spend less time feeling preoccupied with a problem or worry.**
- This technique is meant to combat "hyper-reflection," or extreme focus on an anxiety-provoking situation or object. Hyper-reflection is often common in people with anticipatory anxiety.

Recommendations (Cont'd)

- **Paradoxical Intention:** Paradoxical intention is a technique that invites you to wish for the thing that you fear most. This was originally suggested for use in the case of [anxiety or phobias](#), in which humor and ridicule can be used when fear is paralyzing.
- For example, if you have a fear of looking foolish, you might be encouraged to try to look foolish on purpose. Paradoxically, your fear would be removed when you set an intention to behave as foolishly as possible.
- **Socratic Dialogue:** Socratic dialogue is a tool used to help you through the process of self-discovery by noticing and interpreting your own words. During Socratic dialogue, your therapist listens closely to the way you describe things and points out your word patterns, helping you to see the meaning in them. This process is believed to help you realize your own answers—often, these are already present within you and are just waiting to be discovered.

THANK YOU

END



**For self-improvement, visit
<https://www.positivepsychology.org.ng/>**