

A Brief Overview of Logotherapy

Life is often about our capacity to turn tragedy into triumph. To triumph we have to use what Logotherapy calls “the defiant power of the human spirit.” We have this capacity within each of us, and sometimes, when there is no choice, no way to avoid the pain and suffering in a particular event or circumstance, it is all we have. Life never guarantees happiness, but it does offer each of us meaning. That is the context of the conversations contained in this book.

Logotherapy was developed in the 1930s by Viktor Frankl. Frankl considered the psychological approaches of both Freud (the founder of psychoanalytic therapy) and Adler (the founder of personal psychology which is the forerunner to many of today’s psychological approaches) as too restrictive.

Frankl’s insight was to understand that the study of real human capacity requires more than any one single psychological approach. While accepting the insights of each therapeutic approach, he insisted that each of us has uniquely human qualities which enable every person to go beyond the norm, to take an attitude to any situation, and to choose to respond rather than be driven to do so.

Logotherapy rests on three major assumptions:

- **Life always has meaning.** Life has meaning under all circumstances and at all times. There is something instinctive in the human being that leads us to want to preserve life, both for ourselves and also for those whose lives we see to be in danger. Who would not try to rescue the baby from the burning building, for instance? Logotherapy insists on the meaning of life as a reality.
- **The greatest desire of the human being is to find meaning.** Since they have been on this earth, human beings have grappled with fundamental questions such as ‘Why am I here?’, ‘How should I live, given that I must die?’ and ‘Is there something beyond just my own existence, an overall meaning to life itself?’ Logotherapy does not provide answers. It recognises that each person must grapple with and find answers to these questions.
- **Human beings have freedom of choice.** The human being always has the capacity to take a choice, to take a stand. We have the capacity to choose meaningful directions in our life and something within us will make us uncomfortable with choosing anything else in the longer term.

Frankl’s **psychiatric credo** held that, as outlined above, the human being is always capable of taking a choice. However, Frankl also held that even behind the tragedy of severe brain damage or mental disability, the fundamental human being was still there.

The task of the logotherapist is not to present a blueprint for a meaningful life but to realise that each person and each answer is unique. It aims to assist the client in the search him/herself.

Frankl was once asked what the difference was between psychoanalysis and Logotherapy. Before responding, he asked the questioner to describe psychoanalysis. He did so in these terms: *In psychoanalysis, the person lies on a couch and speaks of things that are difficult to talk about.* Frankl responded that, in Logotherapy, the client can indeed sit upright in a chair but can then sometimes hear things that are difficult to hear.

The task of the logotherapist is to ensure that the person (the client) is assisted with the search for meaning and is uncomfortable unless meaning is being generated in the way they are living life.

Frankl's work as a psychiatrist led him to believe that at least 20% of psychiatric illness presenting at his clinic was due to frustration with the human search for meaning in life. In fact, the root problem was neither physical nor psychological at all. It was simply a problem that presented with physical or psychological symptoms, brought on by a lack of meaning and direction in life.

Logotherapy holds that, when the search for meaning is frustrated or avoided over a long period, the person descends into what is termed an 'existential vacuum'. This is characterised by boredom, addictions and a general malaise with life itself.

Frankl often wrote about what he termed the 'collective neurosis'¹. He saw this as evidenced by a number of symptoms, including fundamentalism in its many forms, but also by a lack of capacity to feel that one person has any influence on the world or by an attitude that lives only for the present day. Logotherapy holds that every individual person is unique, that they have a unique capacity to respond to life and that their response to life is important.

One can never know when it is their hour. One life event can retrospectively fill a whole life with meaning. Frankl was fond of saying that the major question we should ask is not *What do I want from life?* but *What does life ask of me now?* He was adamant that this question was asked of each individual and that only that person can respond. It is the task of the logotherapist to help clients realise the magnitude of that life task.

At this time in history with drug addiction, depression and violence rampant in some societies Logotherapy and what it teaches us about our attitude to life is more relevant than ever.

¹ Neurosis—a former name for a category of mental disorders in which the symptoms are distressing to the person, reality testing is intact, behaviour does not violate gross social norms, and there is no apparent organic cause. In current terminology they are termed 'disorders'.