

Man's Search for Meaning Summary

By Viktor Frankl

We're often told to do what makes us happy. But, even at our happiest, we can often lack motivation. So, what motivates us, and how do we find that magic spark to get us going, and ultimately, to keep us going?

Man's Search for Meaning, describes world-renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's harrowing experiences in Nazi concentration camps, and how he developed his therapeutic approach called logotherapy. We're also shown that meaning is the most powerful motivator, which can save us from despair, even in the darkest of times.

Logos is the Greek word for meaning, so, logotherapy asserts that our primary quest is to find and live a purposeful life. Owing to the fact that meaning may evolve and change over time, the practice of logotherapy may involve re-creating our purpose throughout our lifetimes.

Meaning can give us the will to transcend even the most painful of circumstances. We have been led to believe that striving for happiness and success should be our primary life goal. However, are these really the things that make your life worthwhile? Frankl suggests otherwise; he argues that our quest for meaning is a universal life force that drives every single person. We all need something to live for, and to hope for.

You may know about Viktor Frankl's theory, but his lesser-known background story is equally as fascinating. Frankl was a young psychiatrist living in Vienna, at the time when the rumblings of Jewish persecution were growing louder. Amidst this turmoil, Frankl had the

opportunity to leave and establish a safer life in America. However, he had a heart-wrenching choice to make. Frankl had to choose between embracing the possibilities of a new life, where he and his pregnant wife, could be safe, and his work could flourish. Or he could risk staying and upholding his duties as a son by not leaving his parents to their fate in an increasingly hostile environment.

The decision to stay was based on a pivotal conversation that he had with his father. Frankl's father showed him a relic that he'd collected from a burnt-down church. The engraving on this relic was: 'Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land.' It was at that moment that Frankl decided to stay.

The war escalated. Frankl and his family were separated, then incarcerated in different concentration camps. Tragically, Viktor Frankl was the only member of his family to survive the horrors of these camps. However, by drawing on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl gave the world invaluable insight into human suffering. Not only how to endure suffering, but how to transcend it.

This summary briefly guides us through Frankl's fundamental question, which centers around how anyone managed to survive the psychological devastation of the concentration camps. And his focus is profound in its simplicity. 'It's not about human cruelty – it's about human capacity.' This simple notion is proof of our resilience in the face of suffering. We have an unbelievable capacity to endure. So what keeps us going through insurmountable hardship, trauma, and loss?

The Will to Keep Going

Frankl noticed that the most resilient prisoners, tended to have their own coping mechanisms. These mechanisms usually drew upon their inner strength. This allowed them to hold onto hopes and plans, maintaining the belief that their suffering had meaning. Many of these prisoners coped by reminiscing. They'd also imagine having conversations with their beloved family and friends. This simple practice was something that the camp guards could not take away from them. These forms of mental escape through storytelling allowed them some respite from the brutal reality of their situation.

Other prisoners found solace in nature. They could gain fleeting fragments of happiness, from a mere glimpse of a sunset, or just the sound of birds chirping. There were also those who would sing songs, or find relief through humor and connection. Frankl writes that 'humor is another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation.' Self-preservation can also come from showing strength, and supporting others. For instance; prisoners who might be on the brink of starvation themselves, would sometimes give their last piece of bread to someone in greater need.

Despite their unimaginably difficult conditions, these prisoners tried, as far as possible, to live in accordance with their values. Their inner resolve was something that no-one could take away from them. This idea is paramount. Frankl calls this sense of resolve, the last of human freedoms. Our freedom to choose our response to our circumstances, is one of the things that provide us with the most meaning. Frankl says that 'suffering in itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it.'

Frankl's experience as a prisoner reinforced, what was already one of his key ideas: our search for meaning matters. Life isn't primarily a quest for

pleasure as Sigmund Freud believed. Nor is it a quest for power as Alfred Adler maintained. According to Frankl, life is simply a quest for meaning. We flourish when what we do aligns with our deepest values. Happiness and success can be fleeting, and they depend on external sources. Often, we experience profound emptiness because our lives don't have a sense of meaning or purpose. This feeling of emptiness is known as an existential void.

What Makes Us Human?

The ability to search for, and cultivate meaning is what makes us human. Feelings of emptiness can emerge when people don't have a greater sense of purpose. A lot of research supports this idea; for example, in a study from Johns Hopkins University, students were asked what they considered to be central in their lives. The vast majority of these students, some 78%, reported that finding purpose and meaning in their lives was most important to them.

So, if the meaning of life is to find life's meaning, there are three ways to go about this.

Pursue a Life Task, Love Selflessly, and Suffer Bravely

When Viktor Frankl first entered the camps, they confiscated everything - including his initial manuscript on logotherapy. After the initial shock and grief, he vowed, one day, to leave the camp and to rewrite his manuscript. The need to survive and finish his work, was to become his life's task. He maintained that, 'those who knew that there was a task

waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive.'

You can also find meaning, in the act of loving selflessly. This doesn't just refer to romantic love. It's about compassion, and doing what you can to uplift those around you. This means connecting in a deep and meaningful way, to others and to the natural world around you. For Frankl, self-actualization comes from selfless acts of love and empathy.

As much as we derive meaning from our work and relationships, we can also find meaning during the darkest of times. An older man suffering from severe depression over the death of his wife, approached Frankl. Through losing his wife the man felt that his life had lost all sense of purpose and meaning. Frankl asked the man, 'What would have happened if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive without you?' The man replied that, it would have been terrible; she would have suffered just as much as he was suffering. Hence, as Frankl pointed out, the man's suffering, did indeed have a purpose. The man's pain had saved his beloved wife from suffering. This change in perspective, allowed the man to view his pain in a different way. This allowed him to move beyond his depression. Frankl explains this in the following way; 'suffering ceases to be suffering, the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.'

In Conclusion

Viktor Frankl's poignant message is bittersweet. Meaning can be found in any circumstance, and often we have to endure great hardships to find it. All of us have our own unique set of circumstances to deal with, and comparisons are odious. Therefore, the search for meaning is deeply personal and something that all of us need to engage with. Frankl, offers us all a way to find meaning, and then to use this meaning to transcend

suffering or hardship. Our growth and freedom lie in our power to choose our attitude and response to our circumstances.

The quest for meaning is no easy task and it'll involve striving, struggle, and tension. The key thing to remember is that meaning isn't universal and it's unique to each individual. So let what you do, who you love, and how you respond to life's moments, be a reflection of your deepest values and highest aspirations.

So, what's your meaning?