

Logotherapy: Health Through Meaning

Logotherapy (literally, “health through meaning”) provides a view of human nature that helps us to regain and to retain our health. It sees us not only as creatures that are shaped by genes, drives, and environment, but also as individuals who can shape ourselves within—and often in spite of—our biological, psychological, and environmental influences.

We can do this because our primary motivation is our will to meaning and because we have the freedom to find meaning moment by moment, either by changing a meaningless situation or by changing our attitude when the situation cannot be changed.

How can we find health through meaning? This approach to health is based on three basic aspects of meaning as the logotherapist sees them.

THREE ASPECTS OF MEANING

The first aspect is that *meaning cannot be arbitrarily chosen*. What is meaningful for one person at a specific moment is not necessarily so for another. For a farmer, the meaning of the moment may be feeding livestock. For a volunteer fireman, it may be to rush to a fire. For the farmer to go and watch the fire, or for the fireman to feed his animals would mean that each might have missed the meaning of the moment.

The meaning of the moment thus has an objective component, contained in a situation not created—at least not exclusively—by the individual. It must always be remembered that meaning is to be discovered by each person and cannot be given or prescribed by another.

The second aspect is that *we cannot be driven to meaning* by conscious or unconscious forces, nor can we find meaning through conditioning. Drives and conditioning factors are found in the realm of subjective gains, such as pleasure, avoidance of pain, all types of positive feedback, and such currently popular goals as self-confirmation, self-finding, and self-actualization. Here, a certain behavior brings subjective gains as a reward.

The objective meaning of a situation lies not in serving the meaning-seeker but in serving another person or a cause. Subjective gain is possible as a by-product. The farmer who feeds his or her livestock does it for the sake of the animals; the volunteer firefighter saves lives and property. Their personal rewards are incidental: more productive animals, possibly saving one's own home from the spreading fire. But personal gain is not the decisive factor. Under certain circumstances the farmer may even risk the lives of the animals to save neighbors from fire.

This leads to the third aspect: *Meaningful actions can result in personal gain, but as a by-product*. Often, the gain is greater the less it is intended. One might modify an old biblical wisdom: He who wants to gain his life will lose it. He who is ready to lose it—to give it up to a meaningful task—will gain it.

To return to our examples: The farmer who disregards all physical, psychological, and environmental handicaps to take care of land and livestock will gain by feeling deeply rooted in his farm. The firefighter who prevents disaster finds fulfillment deepened by the appreciation of others.

Obviously, such actions are meaningful only if directed toward a goal worth the effort, and not if they are meaningless “sacrifices,” results of masochistic tendencies, or consequences of the inability to say “no.” Meaningful actions are subjective responses to the objective meaning of the moment.

THE LOGOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACH TO HEALTH

The logotherapeutic approach is thus based on these three consequences of Frankl's understanding of meaning: Meaning cannot be arbitrarily chosen, it does not result from drives or conditioning, and its pursuit leads to personal gains only as a by-product. Logotherapy offers help to the psychologically unstable and sick as well as to healthy persons in spiritual distress. It helps individuals in their search for meaning to discover what is most meaningful in their particular life situations.

The use of logotherapy motivates clients to open themselves to meaningful actions and experiences, to entrust themselves to the meaning of the moment, and to say "yes" to what the situation demands. Their recovery, "finding themselves," their inner satisfaction will come as unintended by-products—treasures carried by the current of meaning fulfillment, inaccessible when the current loses strength.

The goal of logotherapy is to stimulate the flow of meaning fulfillment in individuals, to guide them to *surrender* to this flow, one that carries all that makes life worth living. These goals underlie the practice of logotherapy.

How logotherapy works in practice fills whole libraries. In this chapter, I shall limit myself to four polarities in human life, the basis of interpretation and application in all schools of psychotherapy including logotherapy: conscious vs unconscious, past vs future, positive vs negative, the want vs the ought.

CONSCIOUS VS UNCONSCIOUS

In general, logotherapy focuses on the individual's conscious understanding. When something unconscious is lifted into the conscious, it is more often from that which is not conscious in the noëtic dimension (the human spirit), and not so much from the unconscious of the psychic dimension (the emotions and intellect). An example will clarify the distinction.

Ms. P suffered from depression. A long psychoanalysis uncovered hidden connections and unconscious threads buried in her past, but her depression deepened. She wanted to try a different therapeutic approach.