

Man's search for
meaning, by victor
frankl | analysis



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Introduction

In this brief paper I will discuss the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Victor Frankl. I will give a general overview and what I feel the author was trying to convey in his writing. I will also offer my own personal opinion of the book. Moreover, I will render my impression of how I think the story relates to nursing knowledge, practice and also its relevance to nursing theory.

There have been countless stories telling of the terrible events of the Holocaust, written from many different points of view. We are fortunate to have had Viktor Frankl not only survive, but give his unique account of this horrific time in history, and gain some of his pearls of wisdom on how he chose to look at his seemingly hopeless situation. This book looks deeply at suffering and tries to teach a lesson to us, in how we can use suffering to live a meaningful life.

A Critique of Man's Search for Meaning

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, a Viennese psychologist named Viktor Frankl describes his experiences in Auschwitz. This incredibly insightful interpretation of the unspeakable horrors that unfolded behind these gates is a gift that Frankl gives to us, to help us better understand the concept of suffering and how, if at all possible, to find meaning behind it. With an incredible will to live, aided by his medical training, he was able to develop his method of logotherapy that later would help him in his quest to help others find meaning in their lives under any circumstance. His premise of logotherapy reflects upon nursing theory in many ways, and speaks to how

we, as nurses, can offer solace to our patients in their darkest hours. I will outline these points in this paper.

Viktor Frankl was liberated from the Nazi concentration camps in 1945. Unfortunately, his wife and child had perished there. In the first half of the book Frankl describes in some harrowing detail, what he and the other unfortunate prisoners experienced in the camps. During his time in the camp, Frankl made note of three distinct psychological phases the prisoners would experience. These psychological effects were in some ways, very separate from the obvious physical detriment life in the camp had put upon these poor souls. The three phases were the basis for Frankl's work.

The first phase to be felt was that of shock, which occurred as the train roared up to the gates of the camp. The sheer and utter terror these men and women faced was likely indescribable; as they filed in and stood before an SS officer who motioned to them; right, or *left*. The shock was lifted all but for a fleeting moment, by what he described as the delusion of reprieve, a glimmer of hope they would be spared at the last moment, and set free. "...The condemned man, immediately before his execution, gets the illusion that he might be reprieved at the very last minute. No one could yet grasp the fact that everything would be taken away. All we possessed, literally, was our naked existence." (Frankl, 1946) For Frankl, the peak of this first phase was when upon arrival. Frankl and the other prisoners were ordered to strip, shower, and relinquish all of their possessions. Frankl had the manuscript of his book in his pocket, and, desperate to hold on to it, he soon realized he would have to strike out his former life. (Frankl, 1946).

The second phase emerged quickly, after only a few days in the camp. It was what Frankl referred to as an "emotional death" and was characterized by complete apathy and detachment; a total emptying of the soul. The insurmountable awareness and feeling of complete hopelessness in their situation caused the prisoners to be numb to any further emotion, which was actually a defense mechanism. To allow themselves to feel would lead them to vulnerability and weaken them further. The feelings would inhibit their *survival*. Then Frankl recalls his own detachment as he watched with as little as a quiver, the body of a corpse being dragged callously outside onto the frigid, icy ground.

The last stage Frankl describes occurred after liberation. The newly freed men and women became completely disillusioned; how could they possibly be *free* ? “ Its reality did not penetrate into our consciousness; we could not grasp the fact that freedom was ours” (Frankl, 1964). It took many of them years to even be able to comprehend their freedom being returned to them. They too felt they would have been better off having perished in the camps, since many of those they loved were not spared. This led them to becoming vengeful, angry, and wanting to inflict some sort of suffering upon others. “ They became instigators, not objects, of willful force and injustice. They justified their behavior by their own terrible experiences” (Frankl, 1964) Frankl would repudiate this by saying even though so much wrong has been done to he and fellow prisoners, they really had no right to do the same to others.


As nurses, we interact with people who are suffering every day. (Deal, 2011) It is natural to us to ease suffering not only in hope of ridding the patient of physical pain, but to offer them hope and a positive outlook on their future. Therefore, it can be inferred that the most basic nursing interventions actually have an impact upon the patient's view of the meaning of their life. This is a key point I believe ties Frankl's literary work to nursing knowledge and practice. Logotherapy is not taught to nurses in their normal course of study, but I believe we practice it. We are the ones who are trained to remedy their mental and physical pain. But beyond that, the patient confides in us, revealing their suffering and it is our difficult task to help them try to look at suffering as a way of healing. Frankl points out that suffering is an essential part of a full life. He felt that knowing there is meaning in one's life can help one survive the grimmest of circumstances. He quoted the words of Nietzsche: " He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how* ."

I recall one of the most emotional exchanges I had with one of my own patients. A man was grieving the sudden loss of his wife, and told me how they would always tell each other they couldn't live without the other. The man was beside himself with grief, saying how he no longer wanted to live. I then heard myself speak: " I know you are feeling the most unbelievable sadness at the loss of your wife, but by surviving her, you saved *her* from feeling the same sadness she would have felt if she lost *you* first." The man paused, then said, " Thank you, I would have done anything for her ". Now I didn't know it at the time, but I had practiced a bit of logotherapy. I offered

the man a reason for his suffering. I tried to show him that his life had meaning even in this time of terrible despair.

Nursing and logotherapy are intertwined. Whether we remind the patient at the completion of their sixth round of chemotherapy their daughters' wedding is only a month away, or, if with the loss of a limb, we assure the patient that their new prosthetic will help them walk again. We are giving *meaning* to the suffering they are experiencing. We are giving them hope. Applying Frankl to nursing theory is simple. When patients lose the will to live, they experience emptiness and hopelessness in themselves. Humans are motivated by need, and by being needed. When these feelings are lost, the will to live is as well. The basis for many nursing theories is betterment of the human spirit, aside from the physical being, to promote healing. Giving patients hope and meaning does heal. Mr. Frankl's story was extremely powerful, raw, and emotional. Nurses need to heal not only the things they see, but also, what they don't. As a granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, I personally would like to thank him for his work.

References

 Deal, B. Finding meaning in suffering. *Holistic Nursing Practice* 2011; 25; 205-210

- Frankl, Viktor Man's Search for Meaning (Frankl, 1964)