

Meaning Centered Positive Group Intervention

Paul T.P. Wong

Introduction

Meaning-centered positive group work has much to recommend itself for three reasons: (1) It is an effective way to give positive psychology (PP) away (Wong, 2012a); (2) it is economic and can help many people at the same time; and (3) it is relevant to all people because of its focus on universal existential concerns (Lukas, 1986/2014; Yalom, 1995). According to Corey (2009), existential groups have the potential of helping participants be more honest with themselves, more open-minded in their perspectives, and more aware of what makes life meaningful. Such objectives can be beneficial to ordinary people.

Logotherapy or meaning therapy, as a distinct school of existential therapy, is most relevant to PP and psychotherapy because it is unique in its optimistic outlook and emphasis on personal growth and spirituality (Frankl, 1986; Wong, 2010a, 2014a).

Leontiev's Life Enhancement Group Work

Leontiev's (2015) group work represents a shift from the analysis of what is wrong to existential principles of how to grow psychologically; in other words, it is a move from therapy to coaching. It takes three full days to complete the group work. The focus is on understanding general existential principles and applying them to help participants think about their own long-term problems in a more adaptive way.

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The axiom of the group work is that everyone has needs and strives toward fulfilling them. The assumptions are that they will be able to cope with their long-term problems, both solvable and unsolvable ones, once they achieve a deeper understanding of the world and their role in it.

Lukas' Dereflexion Groups

In contrast to Leontiev, who begins with participants sharing their long-term problems, Lukas (2014) discourages participants from talking about their problems. She calls her group work “dereflexion groups,” as her main focus is to redirect the members’ orientation away from their problems to positive and meaningful activities. The assumption is that such a reorientation is needed in order to achieve self-transcendence. Thus, her group work is positively oriented and meaning-enhancing in terms of both objective and methodology.

Consistent with Frankl’s (1986) logotherapy, Lukas (2014) argues that self-transcendence is the best possible positive intervention because it offers the following to her clients: (1) It broadens their values; (2) it opens the door for them to discover something worthy of self-transcendence; (3) it protects them from egocentricity; and (4) it enables them to find meaning directly and happiness indirectly, through their pursuit of self-transcendence. At the core of Lukas’ meaning-centered group intervention is giving her clients “a picture of a human being that gives hope and courage” (p. 43).

Wong’s Meaningful Living Group

Rather than leaving it to the group members to bring up positive materials for group discussion, as in Lukas’ group, the present author gives a lecture prior to group discussion that provides the content and conceptual tools for group members to learn important principles of meaningful living. The main message is that it is never too late to become what one is meant to be—it simply begins with taking personal responsibility to make meaningful changes, one step at a time.

The Meaningful Living Group meetings were advertised on [MeetUp](#) and the present author’s [INPM](#) website. Each cycle consisted of 12 sessions between an introduction and a concluding celebration. The introduction familiarized potential members with the objectives and methodology of the groups. The concluding session briefly wrapped up and was followed by a party where certificates were given to individuals who had completed at least 10 of 12 sessions.

In the present author’s experience, these lessons were offered every other week free of charge. On average, there were 20 people in attendance over three cohorts. Two facilitators conducted the small group discussion after the lecture. The group

discussion could last more than an hour, depending on the preferences of the group members, but never longer than one and a half hours.

During orientation, potential participants are informed that the group is to be considered a guided journey to discover how to live a happy and meaningful life based on the science of PP and meaning therapy. Furthermore, they are told that research shows there is more to life than being happy (Smith, 2013) and that meaning and purpose are necessary for living a good life (Wong, 2014b). Participants are then challenged with three basic questions about how to make life worth living:

1. Everyone has only one life—how do you get it right the first time?
2. Life is short and finite—how do you make the most of it?
3. Everyone wants a better life—how do you achieve it?

Finally, participants are informed that through the lectures, group discussions, and take-home exercises, they can make progress in finding answers to these important questions. The introduction is concluded with an invitation to join the important journey of self-discovery and self-improvement.

Lesson 1: Who Am I? Discover The True Self You Never Knew

Socrates' famous quote, "Know Thyself," is a philosophical and psychological imperative. It applies to every major area of psychology, from self-acceptance to self-esteem, from self-defence to personal growth. Almost every significant aspect of well-being and mental health is related to self-knowledge.

The Importance of Self-Knowledge

Self-knowledge is the foundation for building a meaningful and fulfilling life. The journey of healing depends on recognizing our own brokenness and weaknesses; the pathway of flourishing depends on acknowledging our intrinsic value and strengths. Unfortunately, many people are afraid to find out the truth about themselves, especially in regard to their "dark side" with its problems. However, we are each unique and worthy human beings despite the things that we fear to face. In accepting ourselves, we will find liberation and empowerment.

The negative consequences of not knowing your real self include:

- Choosing the wrong career or mate,
- Acting inappropriately and encountering unnecessary frustration,
- Wandering in the wilderness and feeling lost,
- Going through life without feeling like you are living,
- Feeling uncomfortable in your own skin, and/or
- Experiencing mental health problems and relational issues.

Self-Acceptance as a Precondition for Positive Change and Personal Growth

The antidote of self-deception is self-acceptance. Self-acceptance enables us to honestly and realistically conduct self-assessment in order to make necessary changes. Self-acceptance means embracing yourself as you are, both your potentials and your limitations. Inner pain often serves as a warning sign that something is wrong in your life and changes are urgently needed.

In fact, a healthy self-concept depends on self-acceptance. Accepting one's inherent value and worth as a human being provides an unshakable foundation for personal growth. This positive affirmation also includes acknowledging one's capability of making positive changes and pursuing what really matters. This sense of self-worth and self-confidence comes when you face and accept yourself as you really are rather than as what you think other people expect you to be. True self-esteem does not depend on superficial characteristics, but on accepting your uniqueness and intrinsic value.

Each of us can live a better life by becoming a better person, regardless of our current conditions and life circumstances, if we continue on the journey of self-discovery and meaning-seeking.

Who Are You? What Is Your True Self?

Your true self is bigger than your occupation, your performance, and even your problems. You have more potential than you realize, so do yourself a favor by finding out more about yourself. It is important to understand that the true self is a constantly evolving system, involving many different dimensions: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. We can seek improvement in any of these dimensions. Therefore, there is always hope for constant improvement toward congruence between where you are now and where you want to be.

Central to this self-discovery is answering the important existential questions of "What am I living for?" or "What am I striving for?" Your answer to these questions will, to a large extent, determine the direction and destiny of your life.

Exercises

- Describe the "real you" in one sentence.
- Ask your best friend to describe the "real you" in one sentence.
- What kind of person do you want to be five years down the road?
- What might be your blind spots?
- What aspects of yourself do you have the most difficulty facing?

Lesson 2: What Really Matters in Life?

The next step of self-discovery is exploring your values and discovering what matters to you and what makes your life worthwhile.

What Really Matters to You

There are two pillars to a meaningful life: self-transcendence and authenticity. Self-transcendence means living for something bigger than ourselves. Authenticity means being true to yourself and taking care of your own well-being. These two pillars are interdependent: You must be true to your calling and develop your full potential in order to give your best in serving others.

Self-Determination and Goal-Setting

Our capacity for self-determination enables us to transcend any and all the determining forces in life. The biggest tragedy in life is people allowing their fears, society, or even parents dictate how they live their lives.

You can start setting new goals right where you are at this moment. Think of the kind of projects you have always wanted to do. Select one that reflects your interests and values the most, such as reconciliation with your loved ones or going back to school to complete your education. It is important that you start engaging in an activity that has intrinsic value—worth doing in its own right—such as volunteering or learning a new skill or subject. The more intrinsic your core values, the less dependent you will be on contingencies or external circumstances. The more self-transcending your life goals are, the more meaningfulness you will experience.

Exercises

- How much is your life worth? \$1,000,000 or more?
- Is the value of your life dependent on your career or profession?
- When is the pursuit of meaning a more promising approach to achieving a worthy life than the pursuit of happiness or wealth?

Lesson 3: What Is the Meaning-Mindset and Its Benefits?

Dr. Viktor Frankl was the first and most influential psychotherapist who discovered the vital role of meaning in healing and well-being. According to Frankl (1985), the most effective way to attain healing and wholeness is through the

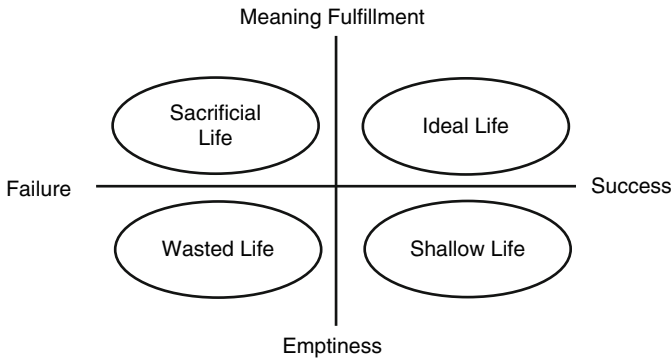


Fig. 1 The meaning-mindset versus the success mindset

spiritual path of discovering meaning. By introducing the vertical meaning dimension and its intersection with the success dimension (Fig. 1), Frankl revolutionized how we define a truly successful life. This graph summarizes what we have learned so far quite well.

The two axes represent two fundamentally different life orientations. One orientation is primarily concerned with how to live a meaningful life—one that is virtuous and focused on serving a higher purpose or the greater good. The other orientation is primarily concerned with how to get ahead in the world, particularly in terms of money and fame. People with this orientation are primarily concerned about personal gains. The above figure, modeled after Frankl (1985), places people into four categories.

If your life is empty, even success remains shallow because it is devoid of significant substance. A commentary on Henry David Thoreau’s spirituality states, “Without a rich inner life, we must fill our existence with things from ‘outside,’ and that makes for a shallow life” (Anders, 2012, p. 144). If your life is not only empty but also unsuccessful according to society’s standards, it will be a wasted one of suffering in vain. It is not difficult to identify people in this category, who feel bitter and angry toward life.

The good news is that when people see themselves and their lives with the meaning-mindset, they cannot fail. Even when their pursuit of a purposeful mission is met with suffering and death, such as in the cases of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., their lives are still objectively meaningful and admirable. As Lukas (2014) has emphasized, self-sacrifice is a necessary ingredient of self-transcendence; those who are not willing to make any sacrifices seldom accomplish anything significant.

The two orientations of the meaning-mindset and success-mindset exert pervasive influences on our lives and society, from career choices and character strengths to civic virtues and community development. It is difficult to develop a harmonious, compassionate, and virtuous society without a significant number of people subscribing to the meaning-mindset.

The Meaning-Mindset and the Spiritual Dimension

According to Frankl (1985), the meaning-mindset involves a shift of basic orientation from ego to logos. This shift of perspective enables us to see clearly the meaning advantages listed in the last lesson. We cannot see clearly the value of meaning and virtue if we are consumed by misguided ambitions for power, wealth, and fame; nor can we appreciate the joy of serving others if we are obsessed with pursuing physical pleasures and cheap thrills. Once we are spiritually awakened, we will begin to see things differently and perceive meaningful moments of beauty and goodness even in ordinary events, as Lukas (2014) has described.

Spiritual activation plays a big part in shifting our attention from everyday busyness to meaningful living. There are three stages in spiritual activation: (1) exploring one's core values and assumptions, as discussed in the last lesson; (2) awakening one's insight into the benefits of meaning-orientation, as discussed in this lesson, and (3) implementing one's insight, as will be discussed in the next lesson.

Exercises

- Complete the Life Orientation Scale (Wong, 2012b) (<http://www.drpaulwong.com/dr-wongs-psychological-tests/>)
- Write a brief paragraph entitled, "This I Believe." Describe what you believe to be most valuable and important in life.

Lesson 4: What Is the Foundation for a Meaningful Life? Understand the Three Basic Tenets of Logotherapy

In this lesson, we will focus on the three interconnected basic tenets of logotherapy (Frankl, 1985, 1986): (1) the freedom of will, (2) the will to meaning, and (3) the meaning of life. One cannot just accept only one or two of these three tenets; they have to be embraced as an integrated package for a good reason, as follows.

Freedom of Will

The freedom of will is not about being free to do or say whatever one wants. What Frankl has in mind is the radical spiritual freedom we have against all the deterministic forces of the environment, genes, and fate.

Frankl also differentiates between responsibility and responsibility. The former comes from possessing the freedom of will. The later refers to exercising our freedom

to make the right decisions in meeting the demands of each situation: “Existential analysis aims at nothing more and nothing less than leading [people] to consciousness of their responsibility” (Frankl, 1986, p. 275).

To be able to transcend our situations and assume responsibility to do the right thing is the most liberating and empowering message. To all those who say that they cannot change their lives because of depression, poverty, or other limiting factors, we can always choose to adopt a positive attitude or make some small change that is under our control.

Will to Meaning

Once we exercise our spiritual freedom of will, we will be able to make very different choices. We will be able to choose to pursue meaning and self-transcendence by doing what is right and responsible. The will to meaning is “the basic striving of [people] to find and fulfill meaning and purpose” (Frankl, 1988, p. 35). The will to meaning is possible because of the human capacity to transcend one’s immediate circumstances.

The will to meaning represents a universal spiritual longing, a noble desire to be truly human. It provides an innate motive to serve a higher purpose and an innate sense of moral responsibility to do what is right.

The implementation of self-transcendence represents the last stage of spiritual activation—doing something for the good of others out of a sense of ethical responsibility. This could be a small gesture of offering a cup of water to a thirsty person, or going out of one’s way to help a friend in need. Any practice of the will to meaning and self-transcendence will grant us a deep sense of satisfaction.

Meaning of Life

If oxygen is necessary for physical health, we have to assume that it is available everywhere on planet earth. Similarly, if meaning is necessary for our spiritual and mental health, we can assume that meaning is available everywhere in this world. Frankl (1985) makes a compelling case that meaning is even available in Nazi death camps.

However, while meaning potentials are available in every situation, it is up to us to discover it. “According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering” (Frankl, 1985, p. 133).

By making use of the meaning triangle of attitude, creativity, and experience, we can overcome both the tragic triad and the neurotic triad. The tragic triad consists of

pain, guilt, and death (Frankl, 1985). These negative experiences make us more aware of our needs for meaning and spiritual aspiration. Frankl (1985, 1986) has observed that people are willing to endure any suffering if they are convinced that this suffering has meaning. Thus, suffering without meaning leads to despair.

Exercises

- How would you encourage a friend who has lost his job and is in despair?
- If you believe that there is purpose in life and there is a reason for your existence, how would that make you more resilient?
- What kind of freedom can you have in a very oppressive situation?

Lesson 5: What Are the Sources and Ingredients of Meaning? The PURE Model

In the present author's ground-breaking research on sources of meaning (Wong, 1998a), hundreds of people from all walks of life were asked what contributes to an ideal meaningful life, if money were not an essential. It was found that there are eight sources of meaning and the good life: achievement, acceptance, transcendence, intimacy, relationship, religion, fairness, and positive affect (emotions).

It is understandable why relationships are rated as the most important. We are social beings; it is only normal that we will feel that life is empty and meaningless if we are isolated and without friends. Positive affect is also expected because scientific research has repeatedly demonstrated a close connection between meaning and happiness. What is most instructive in these findings is that society plays an important role. We feel that it is important that society provides fair treatment or equal opportunities.

Wong (1998a) answers the fundamental question of what we need to do to achieve meaningfulness. Now, we need to answer another fundamental question of what constitutes meaningfulness. Although perceived meaning is subjective, it is possible to identify the fundamental constituents of meaning.

Wong's PURE Model of Meaning

What are the basic components of meaning? Based on PP research on meaning (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Wong, 2012c), Wong has identified Purpose, Understanding, Responsibility, and Enjoyment/Evaluation or PURE as the constituents of meaning.

Purpose refers to both the direction and priorities of one's life. *Understanding* has to do with making sense, not only of ourselves, but also our role in the world. *Responsibility* reminds us that we are accountable to others and a higher authority. A clear sense of personal responsibility is a prerequisite for a civil society and ethical decisions. Finally, *enjoyment/evaluation* sums up the joy and self-regulation of a life well lived. Together, the PURE unit functions as the scaffold to build a better future for the self and society.

The meaning research literature has provided ample support regarding the importance of purpose, understanding, responsibility, and positive emotions (please see Wong's "From Logotherapy to Existential Positive Interventions" chapter in this volume for research support for these four components).

Exercises

- Complete at least one of the three measurements of meaning below and indicate which area of your life is the most meaningful and which area is the least meaningful:
 - Wong's (2013a) PURE test
 - Wong's (1998b) Personal Meaning Profile (PMP)
 - Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler's (2006) The Meaning in Life Questionnaire
- Describe the one thing you have done in your life that is most meaningful to you.
- Examine your beliefs and reflect on which beliefs are not functional or adaptive and need modification.
- Ask yourself whether the assumption or belief that life has intrinsic meaning and value is functional or dysfunctional.

Lesson 6: How Do I Find Happiness in Difficult Times?

Everybody wants happiness. It is easy to be happy when everything goes your way and when your every dream is fulfilled. Unfortunately, for most people, life is not a smooth path, nor is it a joyride. The challenge is how to find happiness in the midst of uncertainty and adversity.

Lyubomirsky (2007) argues that 40% of our happiness is under our intentional control, regardless of circumstances and genes; however, this simplification has been questioned (Biswas-Diener, 2013). She introduced several happiness-enhancing techniques, such as practicing gratitude, forgiveness, goal setting, and mindfulness and has extended Seligman's (2004) *Authentic Happiness* based on additional research findings.

Other research in positive psychology has also shown that happy people are more likely to be open to see the good in their lives (Fredrickson, 2001), have meaning in their lives (Emmons, 2003; Steger et al., 2006), and enjoy loving relationships

(Peterson, 2013). Thus, our happiness depends not only on skills, but also on who we are—our mindset, meaningfulness, and relationships.

In addition to happiness, we also need meaning (Smith, 2013; Wong, 2014b). King, Hicks, Krull, and Del Gaiso (2006) have found that positive affect and meaning in life are related, and that the former may have more effect on the latter. However, it is hypothesized that longitudinal research will show that meaning as measured by active engagement with what really matters and relating well to significant people in our lives will predict positive affect more than the reverse. Patakos and Dundon's (2015) *The OPA Way* lends further support to this meaning hypothesis.

Most of the positive psychology of happiness is based on the assumption that happiness is the final good, and that we can live a happy life by directly pursuing it. In contrast, Frankl (1985) and Wong (2011) propose that if we pursue meaning instead, happiness will become a by-product of meaning, as explained in the last few lessons. This chapter has shown that Wong's (1998a) eight sources of meaning are connected with happiness and made the case that the process of pursuing meaning and self-transcendence is sufficient to endow life with meaning and deep satisfaction (Wong, 2014a), even in difficult times.

Five Myths of Happiness

1. You can have instant happiness.
2. You can have lasting happiness.
3. Everyone has a fixed set point for happiness.
4. Money can buy happiness.
5. The happiness formula is a scientific equation.

Recently, Robert Biswas-Diener (2013) has debunked the above myths:

If you think about it, it is nonsensical to speak about 40 % of your happiness being the result of personal choices. Further, within an individual it does not make sense to separate genetics from circumstances and personal choices. All three interact and mutually influence one another. In the end, it is the spirit of the pie chart that people warm to: the notion that you have some control over your own happiness. Rest assured, that sentiment is correct.

According to the meaning hypothesis, you can still have authentic happiness even when you go through trying times, because such happiness is not dependent on external circumstances but on living a meaningful life of self-transcendence.

Exercises

- Try to help someone who is less fortunate than you. Describe how you feel afterward.
- If you are bored with pleasurable activities, try something that challenges your intellect, courage, or skill.
- Discover the joy of letting go of something that has been bothering you.

Lesson 7: How Do I Maintain Hope in Desperate Situations? Tragic Optimism

Chance and fate intervene. Bad things happen. The best-planned project goes wrong. In this world, nothing is certain and nothing can be guaranteed—macro forces can defeat even our best and most careful efforts. The challenge is this: How can we maintain a sense of hope in a meaningful future in desperate or seemingly hopeless situations?

It took the horror of Nazi death camps for Frankl (1985) to discover the power of tragic optimism (TO). He defined TO as “an optimism in the face of tragedy” (p. 162). His chapter on the case for TO “addresses present day concerns and how it is possible to ‘say yes to life’ in spite of all the tragic aspects of human existence. ... It is hoped that an ‘optimism’ for our future may flow from the lesson learned from our ‘tragic’ past” (Frankl, 1985, p. 17).

His own defiant spirit and courage in the most hopeless, helpless situation bears witness to the power of TO. In addition to the defiant attitudinal value, he also enjoyed the experiential value of watching a beautiful sunset and the creative value of working on his book with scraps of paper. Thus, he demonstrated that by meditating on the meaning triangle, we can experience meaning and optimism.

Unlike other kinds of hopes, TO cannot be crushed by adversities or catastrophes because, like true gold, it is purified in the crucible of suffering and rooted in an abiding inner value. Frankl (1985) aptly states, “The consciousness of one’s inner value is anchored in higher, more spiritual things, and cannot be shaken by camp life” (p. 83).

Wong’s Five Ingredients of Tragic Optimism

Wong (2005) has developed a psychological model of TO and proposed that it comprises the following components:

- *Acceptance of what cannot be changed.* By definition, TO depends on confronting and accepting the bleak reality as experienced.
- *Affirmation of the inherent meaning and value of life.* This is the turning point; the affirmation of life is the cornerstone of TO. Without firmly believing in the possibility of meaning in all aspects of human existence and the intrinsic value and dignity of human life, it would be difficult to experience optimism in the face of tragedy.
- *Self-transcendence.* This represents an action dimension of stepping out of oneself and becoming reoriented toward helping others or serving a greater purpose.
- *Faith in a higher being and/or others.* Faith in a higher being has been a source of strength and optimism to countless individuals in practically hopeless situations. Faith represents a flickering light at the end of the tunnel.

- *Courage to face and overcome adversity.* Courage may be considered the master virtue, because all the other components hinge on courage—the heroic and defiant human spirit. Acceptance requires courage; so does affirmation. Stepping out of our comfort zone to help others or to serve a higher purpose also requires the courage to be vulnerable. One cannot be optimistic without the courage to face an unknown and uncertain future.

Exercises

- How does meaning make tragic optimism stronger than other types of hope that are simply based on positive thinking and confidence in one’s own competence?
- Think of a task that you have been avoiding because of its difficulty and high risk of failure. How would the concept of tragic optimism empower you to complete this task?

Lesson 8: What Are the Practical Steps to Build Resilience? The ABCDE Model

It takes resilience to bounce back after failure and setback. The defiant human spirit and the human capacity for meaning-making are very powerful tools at our disposal. Wong’s ABCDE model (Wong, 2012d) incorporates both the meaning triangle and Wong’s (2005) tragic optimism as a framework to overcome and transcend all kinds of adversities.

There are two possibilities after a tragic or traumatic event. Some become bitter and experience depression or posttraumatic stress disorder, while some become better and experience posttraumatic growth. The following are the components of the pathway of resilience, as represented by the acronym ABCDE.

1. *Acceptance: the reality principle.* Acceptance does not mean giving up or resignation; it simply means accepting what cannot be changed—the trauma, the loss, and the dark side of the human condition. It means accepting areas of “fate” which are beyond our control with courage and hope.
2. *Belief: the faith principle.* Belief primarily means affirming the three basic tenets of logotherapy. It means that there is always some area of freedom in which we can act responsibly and courageously.
3. *Commitment: the action principle.* Commitment simply means moving forward and carrying out one’s responsibility with resolve, regardless of feelings or circumstances. This brings us back to the PURE strategy of striving to fulfill one’s responsibility no matter what, because it is the right thing to do and it is part of one’s life mission. Real change is possible only when one takes the first concrete step in a new direction.

4. *Discovery: the ‘Aha!’ principle.* Discovery involves learning something new about the self and life. It means that as we dig deeper into our resources and explore further, we discover hidden strengths and resources. This is consistent with Wong’s (2012e) deep-and-wide hypothesis of the adaptive benefits of adversity and negative emotions.
5. *Evaluation: the self-regulation principle.* Evaluation means continuing to monitor and make the necessary adjustments to ensure some progress. If nothing seems to work and there is no reduction of symptoms and no improvement in the pursuit of positive life goals, then some adjustments will be necessary. This involves reflecting on one’s life and assessing the opportunities and risks.

Exercises

- Currently, what is the most stressful thing in your life? Apply the ABCDE Strategy and find out whether it works for you.
- Discover an area of freedom in which you can exercise any of the three values of Frankl’s meaning triangle, and discover whether it affects your life in a positive way.

Lesson 9: How Do I Live Life to the Fullest? The Yin-Yang Way

Life is a continuous series of problems and opportunities. The challenge confronting us is how to achieve our life goals by overcoming obstacles and making the best use of opportunities. This lesson focuses on how to manage our avoidance and approach tendencies in an adaptive way.

Wong (2011) emphasizes the Yin-Yang way as the basis for second wave positive psychology (PP2.0) or existential positive psychology (EPP; 2010a) because it avoids these two extremes and integrates positives with negatives. Just like the Yin-Yang symbol, life is a balancing act between positives and negatives. In fact, each positive experience contains the seed of self-destruction; each negative one contains the seed of personal growth. The Yin-Yang approach avoids the excesses of the pursuit of happiness and success, while allowing us to discover the potential benefits of negative experiences.

Basically, life involves a series of approach and avoidance conflicts. In every situation, there are always two options: “go” or “no go.” If you choose to go ahead with your plan, you can rely on the PURE principle to ensure that you are pursuing something meaningful and worthwhile. However, in the process of goal striving, there will always be bumps in the road or real obstacles. These setbacks will make you consider the other option of “no go.” This thought will trigger the ABCDE process to evaluate how to overcome the difficulty.

The continuous interactions between approach and avoidance represent a constant tension between Yin and Yang. Optimal functioning is possible when we do not invest all our energy in the futile pursuit of an unrealistic and unattainable goal. Similarly, we would not be living fully if we readily gave up and spent most of our days in avoidance mode. The positive system seeks to do what is desirable and what holds out the promises of a better future. The aversive system serves as a warning about what is wrong and threatening. There is a downside to the approach system and an upside to the avoidance system. We can optimize the positives in our lives by focusing on the meaning-elements in both systems.

Exercises

- Count your blessings in a negative situation you currently experience.
- Consider the hidden dangers of success when all your dreams are realized.
- In everyday situations, how do you balance the positives and the negatives so that you feel good at the end of each day?

Lesson 10: Why Do Other People Matter? The Practical Spirituality of Self-Transcendence

We are all interconnected in some way. That is both a blessing and a curse. We cannot live without other people. We are hardwired for each other—from babies' attachment to their parents to adults' bonding with their lovers, intimate relationships are the main source of our security, happiness, and well-being. In addition, a healthy family, community, and society are all built on good interpersonal relationships.

One of the challenges before us, as individuals and as a society, is how to strike a balance between self-interest and the welfare of others. Other people matter (Peterson, 2013), because relationships matter a great deal for the good life. To transform an inhumane society into a kinder and gentler community, we need to value people more than self-gain. We all gain at the end when we place other people's well-being above self-centered concerns.

Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence simply means that only when we redirect our focus from self-interest to something bigger than ourselves can we experience meaning in life. Both Abraham Maslow (1993) and Viktor Frankl (1985) have come to the conclusion that self-transcendence represents the highest level of personal development. Frankl is more explicit in pointing out that self-transcendence represents our

spiritual nature as well as our deepest yearning. It is our spiritual dimension that separates us from all other creatures and makes us truly human.

Frankl’s three levels of self-transcendence (Wong, 2016):

1. *Seeking ultimate meaning.* To reach beyond our physical and intellectual limitations and gain a glimpse of the invisible wonders of the transcendental realm.
2. *Seeking situational meaning.* To be mindful of the meaning potential of the present moment with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and compassion.
3. *Seeking one’s calling.* To reach beyond self-actualization and pursue a higher purpose for the greater good. This involves engagement and striving to achieve a concrete meaning in life, that is, a life goal of contributing something of value to others.

At all three levels, we are motivated by the intrinsic need for spiritual meaning. If we can cultivate these three levels of self-transcendence, we will develop a spiritual lifestyle that is good and healthy for individuals as well as society. The more we practice self-transcendence based on the meaning-mindset, the more it will be better for others and ourselves. It is a win-win strategy.

Exercises

- Think of a relational conflict in your life. What difference would it make if you thought in terms of “we” instead of “me” in this situation?
- Have you ever made amends in order to repair a broken relationship? If not, what holds you back?
- What is your communication style? Do you think that your communication style might be part of your relational problems? Fill out the Individual Communication Style Profile below.

Individual Communication Style Profile		
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Cold	--1 --2 --3 --4 --5 --	Warm
Laid-back	--1 --2 --3 --4 --5 --	Intense
Indirect	--1 --2 --3 --4 --5 --	Direct
Guarded	--1 --2 --3 --4 --5 --	Open
Judgmental	--1 --2 --3 --4 --5 --	Appreciative

Lesson 11: What Should I Do When I Feel Stuck? The Double-Vision Strategy

Do you feel trapped in a bad relationship or stuck in a dead-end job? Do you feel discouraged by setbacks because all your struggles seem to be futile? We all have such moments and do not know how to resolve our personal predicaments.

This lesson introduces the double-vision strategy, which can be very helpful in problem solving.

The paradox is that, sometimes, the more we focus on finding a solution to these problems, the more confused and frustrated we become. However, when we step back, expand our vision, and look at the big picture, such as the universal human condition or a higher being, we begin to see our problems in a different light—this shift in perspective enables us to find new solutions.

What Is Personal Is Often Universal

What seems to be a personal problem may be related to a universal human condition. For example, one's anxiety about sending off a daughter or son to another city for post-secondary education may reflect one's existential anxiety about aging and dying.

The double-vision strategy is helpful in pursuing one's life goals if you take a larger view of life. When we keep in mind our higher purpose, we will be less likely defeated by small setbacks along the way. To use a chess game analogy, we do not mind sacrificing a pawn in order to checkmate our opponent's king. To use a sport analogy, we need to keep one eye on the ball and the other on the goal.

When we strive for an ideal as our life purpose, we are more willing to overcome similarly insurmountable problems and hardships. It is by keeping our eye on the big picture that we can deal with small, everyday problems more effectively.

The Double-Vision Strategy

The double-vision strategy simply means you keep one eye on your situational problem and another on your future meaning to be fulfilled. The bigger your vision of the future, the more effective your double-vision strategy. The biggest vision will involve not only the future generations of humanity, but also involve the transcendental realm or a higher being. If you are convinced that you have received a calling from above and are thus striving for the greater good of future generations, then you will not be defeated by opposition, setbacks, or personal problems.

The problem with most people is that they never look beyond their self-imposed prison. They never have the courage to venture out of their cave. Therefore, they will only live in a shadowy land without any idea of what life is like under the sun. A person with a double-vision is no longer preoccupied with everyday busyness and personal problems; such people are able to live on a higher plane and at a deeper level, because they know that their transient earthly life is only an instrument for accomplishing something far greater than they are.

As one of the most popular Chinese sayings goes, "If you step back from your immediate problem, the horizon will broaden and the sky will open up," the double-vision strategy represents a change in perspective as well as a change of value from ego to logos.

Exercises

- How can the double-vision strategy make your life happier and more productive?
- Learn to pause and reflect. This exercise of self-reflection is an effective way to ponder the big picture. For example, reflect on the questions, “Who am I?” “What is my place in the universe?” “What is my life mission?” or “What is God’s purpose for my life?”
- Is it worthwhile devoting one’s life to pursuing one’s calling, even when it does not yield any monetary reward or recognition?

Lesson 12: Learn The Meaning-Centered Pathways to Well-Being

We have now come to the end of our journey of self-discovery. We are now able to pull all the lessons together and have an overview of how meaning plays a central role in living the good life. Meaning not only leads to well-being, but also protects us against distress.

Snyder and Lopez (2007) are correct in proposing the formula: Happiness + Meaning = Mental Health. Wong (1998a) has found that the sources of meaning predict both the presence of well-being and absence of mental illness. This has been replicated and extended to prospective studies (Mascaro, 2014; Mascaro & Rosen, 2008).

However, when people are going through very difficult times, meaning, rather than positive emotions, becomes more important in maintaining some level of well-being (Frankl, 1985; Wong, 2011). According to the meaning-centered approach to well-being, the ABCDE strategy serves the function of transforming negatives into positives, as well as making suffering more bearable. The ABCDE acronym stands for acceptance, belief, commitment, discovery, and enjoyment/evaluation. A detailed account on how these components contribute to resilience and well-being in adverse situations has been discussed in previous works (Wong, 2010b; Wong & Wong, 2012).

In addition, the important role of hope in maintaining one’s well-being and health has been well documented (Snyder, 2000). Hope provides the motivation to strive and improve one’s life. However, in extreme situations, such as the Holocaust or dying from incurable cancer, one needs a different kind of hope, which is found in Frankl’s (1985) concept of tragic optimism.

Therefore, meaning provides at least three pathways toward a healthier and happier life that is both resilient and optimistic. When we cultivate the meaning-mindset and practice self-transcendence, we are on a very promising path toward healing and wholeness. More recently, Wong (2014c) has provided a more detailed integrative model indicating how meaning contributes to our well-being, as seen in Fig. 2.

MEANING-BASED MODEL OF WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

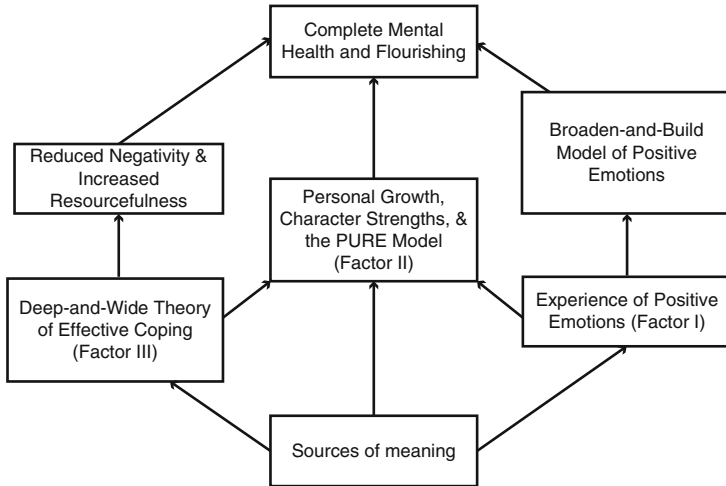


Fig. 2 A meaning-centered model of positive mental health

A meaning-centered holistic model of complete mental health recognizes both the presence of positive emotions and the reduction and transformation of negative emotions and symptoms. Both of these objectives can be achieved through the pursuit of meaning, as shown in Fig. 2 (refer to Wong, 2014c for details). The plain path toward complete positive mental health is through self-transcendence rather than the self-centered pursuit of personal happiness and success. Thus, it is dependent on having a meaning-mindset and an appreciative and defiant attitude, rather than positive feelings and favorable circumstances.

The good life is not just a matter of positive thinking and positive effect, but also a matter of living out a meaningful life in a technological culture and toxic world. It will be both selfish and delusional to think that we can live a happy life by ourselves, without caring about the world in which we live—a world that is polluted by injustice, violence, and evil. Meaningful living is about being a light to shine through the darkness.

Exercises

- Identify an unhappy situation in your life. Try to use meaning-seeking or meaning-making as a way to help you feel better.

- Describe an experience in which you felt good about yourself in going through a very difficult situation because of your decision to practice self-transcendence.
- How will you use the meaning approach to help a friend who is struggling with depression, anxiety, or despair?

Meaning Manifesto

The Meaningful Living Group MeetUp concludes with the below meaning manifesto, which summarizes the main points of the 12 lessons. We celebrate the conclusion of the MeetUp with a dinner and the awarding of certificates of completion.

“Life is much more than the everyday busyness of making a living or striving for personal success. Life is much more than a constant struggle of coping with harsh realities by fighting or escaping. Life can be lived at a deeper level and on a higher plane by adopting a *meaning-mindset* as your basic life orientation.

Your life has intrinsic meaning and value because you have a unique purpose to fulfill. You are endowed with the capacity for *freedom* and *responsibility* to choose a life of meaning and significance. Don’t settle for anything less. No matter how confusing and bleak your situation, there is always beauty, truth, and meaning to be discovered, but you need to cultivate a *mindful* attitude and learn to transcend self-centeredness.

Don’t always ask what you can get from life, but ask what life demands of you. May you be awakened to your sense of responsibility and the call to *self-transcendence*. You become fully human only when you devote your life to serving a higher purpose and the common good.

Let your inner goodness and *conscience* be your guide. Let compassion be your motive and may you see the world and yourself through the lens of *meaning and virtue*. You will experience transformation and authentic happiness when you practice meaningful living. Now, go forward with courage and integrity and pursue your ideals against all odds with the *defiant human spirit*.”

Key Takeaways

- There is mounting evidence in the research literature concerning the vital role played by meaning in life in enhancing well-being and buffering against stress. Meaning-centered positive group work has much to contribute to the mental health movement because it educates participants regarding their essential need for meaning and the basic principles and skills of meaningful living.
- This group intervention is based on both the positive psychology research of meaning and the existential insights and principles of Frankl’s logotherapy and Wong’s integrative meaning-centered therapy. Therefore, it can be used for both community-based groups interested in personal development and various clinical groups that address meaning in life issues.

- For each session, the group activity consists of a mini lecture by a psychologist, followed by group discussions and take-home exercises. All activities are designed to focus on the optimistic outlook of positive changes regardless of circumstances.
- The 12 lessons cover important questions such as “Who am I?” “What really matters in life?” and “How can I find happiness in difficult situations?” These lessons draw upon scientific findings and clinical insights. The applications of the principles of meaningful living answer these universal concerns while taking into account each participant’s personal context.
- Participants learn Frankl’s concept of the meaning-mindset. When life is viewed from this perspective, life takes on more meaning; even adversities are transformed into challenges and opportunities. Participants also learn the Yin-Yang principle of existential positive psychology, which is capable of transforming all negative life experiences into ones that are positive.

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