

## **Meaning-Centred Counselling\***

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### Abstract

After reviewing the role of personal meaning in the literature, the paper presents a psychological model of meaning-centred counselling. As an extension of logotherapy, the model is a hybrid resulting from the marriage between existential therapy and cognitive psychology. Some of the concepts in logotherapy are translated into cognitive processes. Meaning is defined in terms of cognitive, affective and motivational components; this triangular hypothesis of the meaning structure can be used to test the authenticity of specific meanings in life and study developmental changes in personal meanings. The main propositions of the model are as follows: (1) Personal meaning is the key contributing factor of self-validation, which consists of self-acceptance, self-affirmation and self-integration. (2) Personal meaning is a major moderator of stress resistance and well-being. (3) The will to meaning is a primary motive consisting of a) the motivation to seek understanding and coherence through the cognitive process of existential attribution and b) the motivation to discover and pursue meaningful life tasks through cognitive and behavioural processes. (4) There are five parallel motivational principles: survival, pleasure, meaning, reinforcement and social validation; mental health depends on meeting the motivational needs in all five areas. (5) Self-transcendence is a major contributor to personal meaning and well-being. Findings from the implicit theories research and the Personal Meaning Profile are presented to support the above hypotheses.

Various cognitive therapeutic techniques are introduced to promote personal meaning. Existential probing is used to discover the meaning and purpose of events and actions. Contextualizing is employed to place the problem in a larger context. These two assessment tools are aimed at discovering the deeper meaning of presenting problems and the client's ultimate concerns. Magical thinking is used to explore new possibilities for life change. Personal Meaning Profile and effective coping strategies are used to equip and empower the client to cope with life's demands and pursue meaningful life goals. According to this model, the counsellor works closely with the client, not as a passive listener, but as a coach who provides the expertise and social validation needed for success in the client's quest for a meaningful existence.

The implications of the model for career counselling, cross-cultural counselling, developmental counselling and pastoral/spiritual counselling are also discussed. It is concluded that meaning-centred counselling is uniquely suited to meeting the widespread need for meaning and purpose in a society of disintegrating values and unprecedented change. The model's positive message of hope and human dignity model is particularly relevant to three major challenges to counselling psychology in the next century, namely, aging, AIDS and euthanasia.

## Meaning-Centred Counselling

*“Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? What should I do with my present life? What will happen to me next? How can I find love, happiness and success?” Are you seeking answers to these most important questions in your life? Call your psychic counsellor.*

One can see this sort of advertisement on the television and newspapers on a daily basis. Is this a sign of the times, an indicator of the crying need for meaning?

In the context of intense global competition and diminishing job opportunities, life has become increasingly difficult for large segments of our society. Here is a thumb-nail sketch of some common observations:

Young people are the hardest hit by unemployment. Many high school and college graduates have no jobs, no goals, no commitments, nothing to look forward to and nothing to live for; they need a reason to get out of bed and look for something to get through the day.

The ranks of the working poor are being swelled by the under-employed, the under-paid and jugglers of part-time jobs. So many are stretched to the limit just to survive. Often, couples have to leave home before dawn and endure numerous hassles throughout the day -- traffic jams, mean bosses, nasty colleagues, and dirty office politics, etc. They have no time for children, no time for each other, and no time for what they really want to do. They work longer and harder, but still do not have enough money to pay the bills.

Then, there are the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, the slackers, the drifters, and the homeless. There is a growing number of people who live a life of quiet desperation and alienation -- they have given up on society and on the future. For them, the American dream has become an endless nightmare.

If life is so hard, why survive? If life is full of pain and frustration, what is the point of going on? If there is no escape from the numbing repetition of boring routines, to what end do we strive? If one has so little control over what happens to one's life, how can one find meaning and purpose?

*“Why is this happening? Why me? Why now?”* A chorus of Why questions resonates in counselling rooms across the land as well as in the homes of ordinary people in their daily battles for survival.

Frankl (1973a, 1985) characterizes modern society as suffering from a widespread sense of meaninglessness. The loss of traditions and traditional values has made the individual's quest for meaning far more difficult than it was in the past. In the post-modern society of disintegration and diminished expectations, nihilism and despair have

replaced purpose and hope. In the dying moments of the 20th century, many have turned to psychic counsellors, astrologers and New Age gurus for answers. What kind of answers does psychology have to offer to a troubled world?

The quest for meaning is more than a stale, tiresome philosophical cliché; it is one of the greatest challenges facing individuals as well as the nation.

In a moment of awakening to the reality of death and aloneness, Fowler (1981) asks: “When all these persons and relations and projects that shape and fill my life are removed, who and what is left?” (p. *xi*). At certain points in life, we may all have questioned what sustains our being and what makes life worth living.

Such questions will not simply go away, no matter how hard we try to ignore them, because the existential quest is rooted in basic human needs -- the need for order and coherence in the midst of chaos; the need for personal significance and self worth in the face of entropy and death; the need for positive meanings in spite of the negative life events that often overwhelm us. In times of discontent, the search for meaning takes on added stringency.

Yet, mainstream psychology has been equivocal and hesitant in responding to the crisis of meaning. Bruner (1990) points out that cognitive psychology has failed to carry its original intent to “establish meaning as the central concept of psychology” (p. 2), in spite of the fact that “psychology and the social sciences generally have always been sensitive, often oversensitive, to the needs of the society that give them shelter” (p. 6). Psychologists remain divided regarding the role of personal meaning.

Some conclude that life has no ultimate meaning. How can there be any meaning in a society of random shooting, cutthroat competition and moral anarchy? How can there be meaning when many children live fast and die young? How can we talk about meaning, when we no longer have a shared language to communicate truth, love and all the values that are supposed to make life worth living? The only possible answer to absurdity and void is to exercise our freedom and act as if life had meaning.

Another common viewpoint is that questions about meaning and purpose are too subjective and philosophical to be answered scientifically. Trying to study meaning is like stepping into the muddy water of ideology. It is not possible to establish any objective truths about personal meanings of life. Questions of meaning are best left to the philosophers and the clergy. People can be reasonably happy about life without having to settle existential issues. One should simply plunge into the stream of living and take each day as it comes.

But there is an affirmative view -- meaning can be found in all circumstances and meaning matters! Over the past four decades, Victor Frankl has been the most eloquent and influential proponent of this view. During his internment in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl discovered that a positive meaning-orientation is the key to survival: “This

was the lesson I had to learn in three years spent in Auschwitz and Dacha: those most apt to survive the camp were those oriented towards the future, towards a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future” ( Frankl, 1986, p.37).

The present paper reviews the role of meaning in the counselling literature, presents a psychological analysis of the concepts and processes of personal meaning, and describes a comprehensive meaning-centred model of counselling.

### **Review of the literature**

#### The basic tenets of logotherapy

From his own experiences and observations, Frankl (1959) developed the three basic tenets of logotherapy: the freedom of will, the will to meaning, and the meaning of life. The freedom of will liberates individuals from determinism. Individuals may not be free from certain conditions, but they are always free to choose their attitudes towards the circumstances they are in; by exercising individual freedom and taking a stand towards suffering they can rise above whatever predicament they are in (Frankl, 1967).

The will to meaning is considered a primary and basic human motive. The main goal in life is not to gain pleasure or power, but to find meaning and value in life. One is willing to endure pain and hardship to the extent that suffering has a meaning (Frankl, 1959). Frankl considers Freud’s pleasure principle and Adler’s will to power as derivatives of the will to meaning.

Pleasure is a byproduct or side effect of the fulfillment of our strivings, but is destroyed and spoiled to the extent to which it is made a goal or target . . . . The will to pleasure mistakes the effect for the end, the will to power mistakes the mean to an end for the end itself (Frankl, 1967, p.6).

The meaning of life can be found even in the most appalling circumstances, and up to the very last moment of life, but individuals have to discover it for themselves. It is the “will to meaning” and the “freedom to will” which enable humans to transcend external constraints to find meaning in existence.

The meaning of life is unique for each person. Everyone is responsible to find meaning in different situations and to discover one’s own mission in life. When one is stripped of everything that makes life worth living, or when one is in the throes of battling with pain and despair, it is still possible to find meaning: “It is precisely when facing such fate, when being confronted with a hopeless situation, that man is given a last opportunity to fulfill a meaning -- to realize even the highest value, to fulfill even the deepest meaning -- the meaning of suffering” (Frankl, 1967, p.15). His life epitomizes Nietzsche’s dictum: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how”.

Logotherapy does not prescribe meaning, but describes what life would be like without meaning and what could be done to find meaning. The therapist helps the client

gain a new perspective on life and explore new opportunities of finding meaning. Frankl (1959, p. 133) concludes that there are three avenues or three types of values whereby one can discover meaning: creative, experiential and attitudinal.

Creative values are based on what the person gives to the world, such as achievements and good deeds. Experiential values refer to what the person receives from the world through experiencing something or encountering some one. Meaning can be found in an intense experience apart from any action. A single moment of intense experience can provide meaning for a life time (Frankl, 1973b).

Attitudinal values are realized by adopting the right attitude and taking a stand towards unavoidable suffering or an unchangeable situation. The attitude of acceptance is essential in overcoming the tragic triad of guilt, suffering and death (Frankl, 1967, p.24). Acceptance leads to self-transcendence. Frankl argues that it is not suffering per se but failing to see meaning in suffering that causes people to despair. By maintaining an optimistic, accepting attitude, one can turn suffering into something meaningful.

Frankl (1959) believes that there is potential meaning for every human being; one does not need to be a fully functioning member of society in order to lead a meaningful life. The quality of life can be best maintained by fulfilling meanings. Once a potential meaning has been realized, it becomes part of the past; the certainty of past meanings provides an antidote to the uncertainty of the future. Optimism springs from a meaning orientation. For Frankl (1973b), there is no such thing as hopelessness. No matter how bleak the outlook, there is always the possibility that the future will bring some meaning for the person.

When the will to meaning is repeatedly frustrated, it can result in existential or “noogenic” neurosis. This frustration itself need not be pathological. The search for meaning may involve distress and tension, but this kind of tension is beneficial, because the dynamic of striving towards a valuable goal reorients individuals towards meaning. Frankl (1967) claims that mental health depends not on a tensionless state of homeostasis, but on “the striving and struggling for something worth longing and groping for” (p.68).

### Evaluation of logotherapy

Recently, Fabry (1995) raised a very poignant question: “As our century ends, the world is in chaos. Religious conflicts, national struggles, trade wars, cutthroat competition, ecological disasters, crime waves, family breakups -- what can put *sapiens* back into *homo*?” (p.7).

More than ever, Frankl’s message offers hope to a wide variety of individuals struggling to find meaning for their existence. His view that meaning is essential to both mental and community health is gaining currency (Fabry, 1968; Frankl, 1992; May & Yalom, 1989; Wong, 1989a, 1991; Yalom, 1980). For example, Maddi (1970) reports that failure to find meaning leads to existential sickness. He emphasizes that individuals

must create their own meanings through symbols, imagination and judgment. Wong (1989a) documents the important role of personal meaning in successful aging. Many social ills, such as drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide may be viewed as individuals' attempts to escape from meaninglessness (Jacobson, Ritter & Mueller, 1977; Padelford, 1974). Some evidence already exists, suggesting that promotion of personal meaning may be effective in addressing these social problems (e.g., Carroll, 1993; Ellis & Smith, 1991).

Logotherapy is not a formal theory or a closed system; it is a therapeutic approach that focuses on the central role of meaning in adaptation and survival. Frankl (1969) points out that the term logotherapy is used in a broad sense, and its relevance extends beyond the clinician's office. He has made it clear that logotherapy can help the general public. The strongest appeal of logotherapy is that the existential quest is a universal human experience and most people can benefit from meaning-centred counselling. Even though individuals have the freedom and the will to find meaning, they do not always succeed. A variety of external and internal obstacles may frustrate one's existential search. The problem is further compounded by misguided life goals (Adler, 1931). For example, some believe that meaning only comes from getting to the top of the ladder. Others believe that life has meaning only when one is wealthy. Unfortunately, attainment of these goals often leads to feelings of emptiness and disillusion. Logotherapy is intended to help individuals discover the true missions of their lives.

The main weakness of logotherapy is that its principles are stated in philosophical terms or in metaphor. This vagueness precludes scientific analysis. Although many of Frankl's views seem intuitive and are widely endorsed by therapists, Frankl has been criticized for making claims unsubstantiated by research (Patterson, 1986; Yalom, 1980). For example, there is no *a priori* reason or empirical evidence to support Frankl's (1965, 1969) claim that meaning in life occurs on the noological dimension which is separate from the psychological dimension.

Another common critique of logotherapy is that it over-emphasizes values and spirituality. Therapeutic sessions often consist of teaching the values and philosophy of logotherapy. Weisskopf-Joelson (1975) concludes that logotherapy is not scientific in nature but represents a system of values or secular religion. Yalom (1980) also points out that Frankl's position is basically religious, because people must accept on faith that there is meaning in life.

It is now widely accepted that values and meanings are important considerations in counselling (Patterson, 1986). There is also increasing recognition of the relevance of religious values in psychotherapy and mental health (Bergin, 1980, 1991; Jones, 1994). Nevertheless, an emphasis on spirituality and values does not negate the need for scientific analysis and systematic research.

In spite of his rise to prominence in psychology (Sahakian, 1985) and his ever increasing influence on the general public, Frankl's impact on research and academic

psychology has been limited by the philosophical and religious approach favored by Frankl and his followers. His writings are faithfully proclaimed and expounded by his disciples as if they were the sacred scriptures. Within the logotherapy movement, there is little evidence of critical self examination and creative tension. What is needed are fresh ideas, rigorous debate and systematic research, without which new developments in logotherapy are unlikely.

### The role of meaning in humanistic/existential psychology

Several themes of humanistic/existential psychology directly bear on personal meaning (May & Yalom, 1989). For example, the theme of personal growth recognizes that life is more than survival and pleasure seeking; it acknowledges a basic motivation propelling and drawing humans towards the higher goal of self-actualization.

Allport (1955) differentiates between deficiency and growth motives. Growth motives include long-range purposes and striving towards distance and goals. "The possession of long-range goals, regarded as central to one's personal existence, distinguishes the human being from the animal, the adult from the child, and in many cases, the healthy personality from the sick" (p. 51).

Similarly, Maslow (1970, 1971) differentiates between basic needs and metaneeds, which correspond to Allport's deficiency and growth motivations. According to Maslow (1968), the ultimate goal is self-actualization, which, in simple terms, means to fulfill all of one's potential. The higher one moves up on the hierarchy of needs, the more meaningful one's life becomes. Self-actualization is considered to be a basic human tendency. Many people fail to self-actualize because of external constraints, fear of risk-taking or being blind to their own potential. One of the qualities of a self-actualized person is self-acceptance -- accepting one's self with all one's limitations and accepting the world in which one lives. There is meaning inherent in the act of self acceptance.

The theme of self-actualization is also prominent in Carl Rogers' writings: "The organism has one basic tendency and striving -- to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism" (Rogers, 1951, p. 487). "Man's behavior is exquisitely rational, moving with subtle and ordered complexity toward the goals his organism is endeavoring to achieve." (Rogers, 1961, p. 194-195). The purpose of life is to discover and actualize the true self -- to become what we are meant to be by design or choice. Rogers (1980) believes that "our organisms as a whole have a wisdom and purposiveness which go well beyond our conscious thought" (p. 106).

Rollo May is more explicit in his writings on meaning and purpose. He affirms that life has meaning:

The creative person can affirm life in its three dimensions -- affirm himself, affirm his fellow-men and affirm his destiny. To him life has meaning. He is warmed by the friendship of his fellows and cheered by the confidence that he is of worth to them. Love can be supreme pleasure to



him precisely because it is more than pleasure. His work can be satisfying precisely because it is part of a creative purpose larger than any particular work. All of which means that life's fundamental question receives a positive answer: the person has confidence in meaning in his destiny" (May, 1940, p. 19).

Personal meaning not only comes from the continuous process of fulfilling one's potentials, it also comes from religious beliefs, because "the essence of religion is the belief that something matters -- the *presupposition that life has meaning*" (May, 1940, pp. 19-20). "Denying the worth of other people, one cannot love with joy; denying purposiveness in the world, one cannot work with gratification; and denying meaning in the total scheme of things, one cannot face one's own destiny with courage" (p. 31).

May (1953, 1967, 1969) also emphasizes making choices and being authentic as ways of experiencing meaning. Life is a succession of choices in various life situations. You live your life most meaningfully if you recognize and accept the fact that one cannot avoid decisions. Personal meaning is derived from the conscious process of decision-making and from commitment to those decisions. Making choices involves taking chances: you can decide to be your authentic self or conform to tradition and convention. Authenticity involves self-acceptance and the courage to maintain individuality.

These views may be criticized for placing too much emphasis on the individual and not enough emphasis on self-transcendence and the community. In contrast to these proponents of self-actualization, Frankl advocates that the highest meaning does not come from self-fulfillment, but rather from the actualization of a life-task or life-goal which transcends self-interest. Fabry (1995) summarizes Frankl's view:

Self-actualization, a popular goal in affluent societies, is fulfilling only when it is oriented toward meaning, not pleasure, power, and riches. Logotherapy maintains that meaning comes from self-transcendence (to reach out beyond oneself and do things for the sake of others), not from self-actualization (p. 9).

Similarly, Bettelheim (1976) believes that the most difficult achievement and the greatest satisfaction is to find meaning in our lives; in order to find meaning, one must transcend the narrow confines of self-centred existence and make a significant contribution to society.

### The role of meaning in psychological research

Research on personal meaning has been spotty and scanty. Most of the prior studies on the linkage between personal meaning and psychological well-being has been documented (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Reker & Wong, 1988; Wong, 1989a, 1991, 1993).

However, demonstration of a positive relationship between personal meaning and various outcome measures is just a first step. More vigorous and systematic research is

needed to elucidate the construct of meaning and its role in adaptation. Consistent with Frankl's position, it may be hypothesized that meaning is not only a necessary condition for mental health and personal growth, it is an important moderator in effective coping and stress resistance. This moderator hypothesis is likely to catapult personal meaning from the armchair of philosophical discourse to the centre stage of psychological research. There is already some empirical evidence that meaning is a better predictor of well-being than locus of control and optimism (Wong, 1993a).

In recent years, issues related to meaning and purpose are receiving increasing attention from researchers (Baumeister, 1991; Ebersole & de Vogler, 1985; Emmons, 1986; Faran & Keane-Hagerty, 1991; Korotkov, 1993; Little, 1983; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Essex, 1992; Setterland & Niedenthal, 1993). These new directions of meaning-related research are reviewed in Wong (forthcoming).

### **Meaning-centred Counselling**

Whenever I mention meaning-centred counselling at meetings or in graduate counselling classes, the most common reaction is: "Is this the same as Logotherapy and existential psychotherapy?"

My answer is "Yes" in terms of its emphasis on existential issues and the central role of personal meaning, but with respect to conceptual analysis and therapeutic techniques, meaning-centred counselling has more in common with cognitive therapy. Whenever possible, the philosophical insights of existential psychology are translated into cognitive/behavioral processes and key concepts are operationalized. Furthermore, it introduces existential interventions, based on cognitive/behavioral principles. In sum, meaning-centred counselling is a hybrid from an unlikely marriage between existential psychotherapy and cognitive/behavior psychology.

Meaning-centred counselling adopts the basic tenets of logotherapy and it may be considered an extension of logotherapy. However, there are differences in details and in emphases. For example, Frankl (1969) defines the will to meaning as the "basic striving of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose" (p.35). From the perspective of meaning-centred counselling, the will to meaning consists of two psychological processes: the motivation to seek the core meaning of a given life situation, and the motivation to seek purpose and significance for one's life goals.

The main difference between logotherapy and meaning-centred counselling is that the former takes a philosophical and spiritual approach, while the latter favors a cognitive or psychological approach. For example, Frankl (1959, 1967) considers meanings and values as belonging to the noological dimension, separate from the psychological dimension. But Patterson (1986) argues that "it should not be necessary to consider meanings and values as constituting an independent aspect of the individual; they should be included as part of his or her psychological aspect" (p. 453). The present position is that all existential issues, including meanings and values, can be subjected to

psychological analysis. For example, existential attribution is concerned with questions of meaning, purpose and value, but it, like causal attribution, is a cognitive process (Wong, 1991). Similarly, the assignment of personal worth and significance to life tasks may be conceptualized as an attributional process or incentive motivation (Klinger, 1977).

In its present stage of development, meaning-centred counselling is neither a formal theory; nor a system of therapy. It is a comprehensive conceptual model which emphasizes the central role of personal meaning in the process of adaptation and personal growth. It is an umbrella that covers various intervention models that emphasize the central role of personal meaning. Ishiyama's (1989) self-validation model is an example, because affirmation of meaning is instrumental to self-validation. In a more recent paper, self-validation is defined as "a subjective experience of physical, social, personal and spiritual well-being by means of affirmation of one's sense of self, purpose in life, and meaningful personal existence in a given sociocultural context" (Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994, p.168).

Meaning-centred counselling assumes that desirable changes and personal growth primarily depend on: a) understanding and accepting the true meaning of one's life situation, b) self and social validation of personal existence as being meaningful and worthwhile, and c) the pursuit and actualization of valuable life goals. Meaning-centred counselling recognizes the importance of affirming different aspects of self, such as physical appearance, intelligence and abilities, but it considers affirmation of personal meaning as the heart and soul of self-validation. During intervention, the main focus is on discovering and realizing meaningful life goals.

Another distinctive of meaning-centred counselling is that it explores the deep structure of personal meanings. In contrast to Freud's depth psychology, the deep structure of meaning is not hidden in unconsciousness. Even though one may not be fully aware of the deep meaning structure, and may have difficulty verbalizing it, one can access it through reflection, critical examination and life review.

Taking the phenomenological approach, Rogers (1951, 1961) believes that what is real to the person is that which exists within the person's internal frame of reference. The person's reality consists of his/her subjective perceptions and experiences; this inner reality forms the basis of behaviors and actions. Meaning-centred counselling goes deeper than the stream of consciousness; it delves into the subterranean currents of existential anguish, deep-seated beliefs and the core process of meaning, which select and color the phenomenological experiences.

During the assessment phase, meaning-centred counselling focuses on the deeper meanings of the underlying problems, rather than the surface complaint that brings the client to the counselling situation. As therapists, we are interested in the core values, existential anxieties, and unique thinking processes involved in the client's construction of his/her life situation. In other words, we are not only interested in how the clients feel and constructs reality, but in why they feel and experience reality in a certain way. It is

also important that the client come to understand and accept the uncovered meaning as being true and authentic.

### What is personal meaning?

A number of definitions of personal meaning have been proposed, such as an interpretation of life (Weisskopf-Joelson, 1968), and an integral part of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979). Baumeister (1991) defines personal meaning in terms of four different needs for meaning: purpose, value, efficacy and self-worth. His conceptual analysis is helpful, because it identifies the three commonly accepted defining characteristics of meaning, namely, purpose, value and personal worth. However, self-efficacy is considered to be related to the need for control and competence rather than to the need for meaning (Wong, 1992).

Generally, two types of meaning have been recognized: the ultimate meaning of life and the specific meanings in life. The ultimate meaning of human existence can be discovered through religious beliefs, philosophical reflections and psychological integration, whereas specific meanings in everyday living can be created through engagement, commitment and the pursuit of life goals. The latter can also be derived from the former. For example, everyday chores can derive certain meaning from one's belief that life as a whole has ultimate meaning. Effective coping with suffering, illness and death require both types of meaning.

Another way to conceptualize personal meaning is in terms of its structures. On the basis of prior literature, it is hypothesized that meaning consists of three basic components as shown in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

The cognitive system consists of beliefs, expectations, and schemas. It includes one's self concepts, world views, assumptions about people, and value schemas (Allport, 1955). It serves as a road map in our quest for meaning, and it significantly affects how we feel about ourselves and life situations. This is why Figure 1 shows cognition as forming the basis for the other two components.

Personal meaning may be defined in terms of three inter-related components. With regards to the cognition component, **personal meaning is defined as an individually constructed and culturally based cognitive system, which makes sense of life and endows it with purpose and significance.** This cognitive system is developed in a particular cultural context, thus incorporating many of the beliefs, values and assumptions shared by that culture. Effective cross-cultural counselling needs to be based on a good understanding of the cultural traditions that shape individuals' belief and value systems. The cognitive system is also derived from a unique set of past experiences and evolving life situations. For example, the experience of trauma can profoundly change one's perceptions and expectations of life and people.

The cognitive system is a dynamic system, which functionally integrates beliefs, attitudes, and values (Rokeach, 1968). Any change in any part of the system will affect other parts and the meanings that ensue. The cognitive system may vary in complexity and ideology. It may involve nothing more than a set of shared beliefs and values of a particular culture, but it may also be a highly individualized and complicated system. Regardless of its level of complexity, however, the cognitive system typically addresses several fundamental issues such as: What do I really value in life? What makes life worth living? Inability to answer these questions leads to an existential crisis. According to Maddi (1970), the cognitive component of existential neurosis is “meaninglessness, or a chronic inability to believe in the truth, importance, usefulness or interest value of any of the things one is engaged in or can imagine doing”.

In terms of the motivational component, **personal meaning is defined as the pursuit of activities and life goals considered by the individual to be valuable and worthwhile.** A meaningful life is never passive; it entails more than philosophical reflections. There is a will to meaning -- a forward thrust towards purposefulness and significant life goals. The quest for meaning is assumed to be a primary, universal human motivation; it goes beyond willing and wishful thinking; it demands expenditure of energy and time. It is guided by the cognitive system, and expressed in activities of commitment and goal striving. Therefore, the motivational aspect may also be regarded as the behavioral component of personal meaning.

In terms of the affective component, **personal meaning is defined as feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment that flow from the pursuit of worthwhile activities and life goals.** Feelings of fulfillment also stem from having positive beliefs and values about life. For example, holding an adaptive attitude towards suffering can provide certain measures of solace! In short, positive affect is an inevitable byproduct of living a meaningful life. It feels good to do something good; it feels good to experience moments of beauty, and it feels good to realize that one has not lived in vain.

Thus, the structural definition of personal meaning is that **it is an individually constructed, culturally based cognitive system, which influences one’s choice of activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth and fulfillment.** This definition identifies the key elements of a meaningful existence, and indicates their interrelationships.

The triangular structure of personal meaning is important for both counselling and research. As the foundation upon which to build a meaningful life, this structure not only provides a sense of coherence and of purpose, but also defines the sources of motivation and satisfaction. It is hypothesized that authentic personal meaning involves all three elements. Absence of any one element will undermine personal meaning.

This triangular hypothesis provides a useful criterion to determine whether any activity or life task is truly meaningful. For example, according to this structural analysis,

an addictive lifestyle is not meaningful. Although drug addition may have a strong motivation component, in that addicts will do anything to procure drugs, there is no cognitive basis to affirm the value and purpose of addiction. Furthermore, addiction entails cycles of pain and self-loathing rather than positive feelings about oneself and life situations.

Research on implicit theories of meaning (Wong, 1989b) has found evidence of all three components. In the study, individuals from all walks of life were asked to describe the characteristics of an ideally meaningful life. Most of their responses fit these three categories. However, the study also yielded two additional components: Social and Personal. Figure 2 shows the illustrative responses in each of the five components.

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Insert Figure 2

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The social category encompasses both the traditional values of love and caring as well as the importance of good personal relationships. Frankl (1959) has long recognized that love is the key to meaning: “love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire . . . the salvation of man is through love and in love” (pp. 58-60). Frankl (1973) also contends that individuality finds its meaning only in its relationship with others and its role in the community.

The personal category includes various personal qualities and qualifications, such as intelligence and education. The first three components reveal what personal meaning is; they constitute the structure of personal meaning. The latter two components reveal what kind of individuals are most likely to find meaning; they may be considered part of the preconditions of personal meaning.

The Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) has been developed on the basis of the above implicit theories research as well as on additional research on sources of personal meaning for individuals across the life span. Factor analysis of the items yields eight orthogonal factors. Figure 3 shows the representative items of each factor.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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One needs to keep in mind that if the purpose of research is to use personal meaning to predict well-being or distress, then items related to the Happiness component should not be included, because positive affect is confounded with outcome measures. The perception of being treated fairly presupposes justice. Thus, individuals are less

likely to find life meaningful, if they feel that they have been discriminated against by society or by the powers that be. The PMP is a useful tool because it not only provides an index of overall meaningfulness, but it also indicates the sources of meaning.

Yalom (1980) identifies several sources of meaning: altruism, dedication to a cause, creativity, the hedonistic solution, self-actualization, and self-transcendence. Reker & Wong (1988) identify the following additional sources of meaning: meeting basic needs, personal relationships, personal achievement, personal growth, religious beliefs and activities, acceptance and recognition by others, enduring values and ideals, traditions and culture, and legacy. The PMP is able to encompass these various sources of personal meaning.

Self-transcendence is a key concept in existential psychology and is considered essential to a meaningful life (Frankl, 1969; Yalom, 1980). It is generally defined as transcending self interests as well as present life situations: “The essentially self-transcendent quality of human existence renders man a being reaching out beyond himself” (Frankl, 1969, p.8). Research with The PMP has not only established self-transcendence as an independent facet, but has also demonstrated that self-transcendence is the best predictor of well-being in the elderly (Wong, 1993a).

To facilitate communication, it is helpful to keep in mind the different ways of classifying meaning. In terms of **types of meaning**, one can differentiate between the ultimate meaning of life and the specific meanings in life. With respect to the **basic structure**, personal meaning can be reduced to three components: cognitive, motivational and affective. In terms of **sources of meaning**, we have identified eight orthogonal factors. In terms of **preconditions of meaning**, we have identified social relationships and personal qualifications. Frankl has identified three **modalities** or **ways of finding meaning**, namely, activities, experience and attitude. Meaning-centred counselling is concerned with all five aspects of meaning.

#### Basic assumptions of human nature

Meaning-centred counselling shares some of the same assumptions commonly held by existential psychologist: both believe that existential anxieties are an inevitable part of the human condition, and that human beings have the freedom of choice and the capacity to transcend environmental influences. Here, I will outline five levels of human motivation which are useful in meaning-centred counselling:

(1) **The survival principle** -- People are motivated to meet their basic survival needs including food, water, and protection from tissue injuries. Being alive is, in itself, a strong motivation to survive. To stay alive is the key to receiving all that life offers. Without being in the world, there would be no possibility of discovering pleasures and meanings. Without tomorrows, there can be no opportunities for actualization. However, the survival instinct, by itself, may not be sufficient to maintain life, nor is it sufficient to explain why some people choose to die, while others choose to live when life becomes

unbearable. There are certain conditions in which death seems far more attractive than survival and yet, many individuals will choose life, regardless of the cost. Therefore, there have to be other sources of motivation.

(2) **The pleasure principle** -- People are motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This principle provides a partial answer to why people work so hard in order to survive. People do not just eat to live -- they also live to eat. There are many small pleasures that seem to make life worth living -- dining out, shopping, going to concerts, etc. But the pleasure principle has been overrated, because the pursuit of pleasure and happiness rarely leads to a fulfilling life. My research on implicit theories of meaning (Wong, 1989b) has found that very few respondents consider hedonistic pleasure as a source of personal meaning. Similarly, an increasing number of clients are successful by any objective standard, yet they are very dissatisfied with their lives and seek counselling. They have everything, and yet they have nothing. They may have everything money can buy, but they don't seem to have what really matters in life. They ask, "Is this all there is?" One of the important insights from existential psychology is that if one pursues happiness as the primary goal of one's life, that happiness will get away like a butterfly; however, if one seeks something meaningful, then happiness will come in through the back door (Frankl, 1959; Yalom, 1980).

(3) **The meaning principle** -- People are motivated to construct meanings. Survival instincts and the pleasure principle cannot adequately explain human behavior because we are spiritual beings who need a higher purpose to endow our lives with significance. We are also symbol-making creatures who create an internal reality of signs, plans and life goals.

We are motivated to seek and construct meaning. This quest takes on two forms: (a) We actively seek to make sense of things that happen to us. When bad things happen to us, we automatically ask, "Why me? Why this?" (b) We constantly want to find a higher purpose to endow our lives with significance and meaning. The former may represent the reactive search for coherence and understanding; the later, the proactive search for purpose and significance.

It is the search for meaning that sets us apart from other animals; we cannot be authentic human beings without being true to our beliefs in what makes life meaningful. The meaning principle is closely linked to spirituality (Wong, 1993a) because the quest for the ultimate meaning of life deals with many of the same issues as does religion: issues such as who we are and where we are going.

Frankl (1969) considers the noological and spiritual dimensions as equivalent. Even though he acknowledges that meaning can be fulfilled without religious experiences, he believes that further meaning can be actualized if individuals experience not only the task, but also "the taskmaster who has assigned the task to them" (Frankl, 1973b, p.58).



(4) **The reinforcement principle** -- People need a certain level of reinforcement in order to persist in their pursuit of life goals. All the available evidence indicates that goal-directed behavior will persist only when it is reinforced. Prolonged periods of non-reinforcement eventually lead to extinction and depression, unless alternative goals are available (Wong, 1995a). Reinforcement consists of both tangible rewards and information that progress has been made towards goal attainment. No matter how noble one's mission, or how intrinsically valuable one's life task, it cannot survive indefinitely without some reinforcement. Psychological problems are likely to develop when the pursuit of important life goals is consistently unreinforced and there is little hope of eventual success. We not only are made for meaning, but also are born for success.

(5) **The principle of social validation** -- People need acceptance and affirmation from significant others that their lives have worth and significance. Social validation means more than emotional and practical social support -- it involves unconditional positive regard and affirmation from others. Social validation is needed as confirmation of self validation. Individuals may have accomplished a great deal for society and have every objective evidence for success, but they still need social validation to confirm that they matter and that their lives have value and significance.

There is an important distinction between social validation and need for approval. We agree with Rogers (1961) that one of the signs of being an authentic person is to have the courage to follow one's own convictions. An authentic person does not need the approval of others for decision making. However, we cannot live and behave as if we are living on an isolated island without social connectiveness (Merton, 1955). From time to time, we need feedback from others that we exist and we matter (Amundson, 1993; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). We need confirmation from significant others (Sullivan, 1953) that our lives have worth. This principle recognizes that we are social beings -- we need meaningful relationships and social validation as much as we need oxygen. We all have the need to be heard, understood and accepted as individuals. Our sense of self worth invariably depends on social validation.

The above five principles constitute a motivational model of human nature. We derive energy from five different sources -- biological needs, hedonic pleasure, the quest for meaning, external reinforcement and social validation. These principles indicate that we are more than information-processing machines or animals driven by instinctive needs. We are purposive and spiritual beings capable of striving towards future goals and of transcending current realities. While the search for meaning is intrinsically motivating, it also needs extrinsic reinforcement and social validation.

Meaning-centred counselling permits a wide range of assumptions regarding human nature; however, the meaning principle is more consistent with the view that humans are spiritual beings, capable of believing in and communicating with God.

These five levels of motivation are parallel rather than hierarchical; they can be pursued all at the same time. Individuals' belief and value systems dictate which source

of motivation is their primary driving force in life. Many people devote all their energy and time in hedonic pursuit, while others embrace deprivation and untimely death in service of a higher calling. However, positive mental health requires that motivation is derived from all five sources. Psychological problems are more likely to develop when meaning-related needs are not met. For example, anxiety is related to feelings of insecurity with regards to the prospect of failing to achieve major life goals or losing what makes life meaningful. Depression may result from the absence of meaningful life tasks or prolonged, repeated failure to realize major life goals.

### Key concepts

(1) **Existential attribution** -- Wong & Weiner (1981) have demonstrated that people are motivated not only to inquire about the causes of undesirable events (causal attribution) but also to seek the reason and purpose for their own behavior (existential attribution). For example, when students are not doing well in school, they not only want to find out what might be the cause, but also wonder what's the use of staying in school when there is no assurance of securing a job after graduation.

Wong (1991) proposes that individuals function as lay philosophers concerned with purpose and meaning. Existential attribution is mainly a *reason*-based explanation based on subjective reflections and values; it represents a deeper level of processing than causal attribution. In meaning-centred counselling, especially during the assessment stage, the therapist solicits existential attribution of the complaint by asking such questions as: "Why do you want to maintain this relationship if it has caused you so much pain?"; "What might be the reasons that you are bothered so much by this issue?" The search for existential attribution often reveals deeper and larger existential issues, such as fear of loneliness and death, and lack of meaning and purpose.

(2) **Existential coping** -- In our studies of successful aging, we have discovered that healthy and well-adjusted seniors use existential coping more than their less successful counterparts (Wong & Reker, 1984). Basically, existential coping takes on two forms: accepting uncontrollable problems as the reality of life, and perceiving some positive meanings in negative life experiences. This philosophical way of coping is more effective in dealing with human suffering, such as chronic illness and death, than is problem-focused or emotion-focused coping (Wong, 1991).

Existential psychology has long recognized the importance of accepting anxiety and suffering as a normal aspect of human existence. For example, Kraft (1974) advocates that nothingness is an essential human experience and a stepping-stone towards a healthy, meaningful life. The language of nothingness includes such negative emotions as loneliness, depression, anxiety, guilt, frustration, anger, and boredom. Many people feel guilty and helpless for these experiences of nothingness. Kraft concludes that people fight a losing battle if they try to deny or escape from the existential experience of nothingness. He believes that creative acceptance is the key to transforming nothingness into meaning. The essence of creative acceptance is to affirm and be open to the

experience of nothingness. Frankl (1959) stresses the attitudes of acceptance and the transformation of unavoidable suffering into something positive. Existential coping translates these two types of attitudinal values into cognitive coping processes. We have now developed a reliable and valid measure of existential coping (Peacock, Wong, & Reker, 1993; Wong, Reker, & Peacock, 1991), which can be a useful tool in helping clients deal with suffering.

(3) **Life task** -- This refers to active engagement in an activity considered valuable and meaningful. It is a concrete step towards a life goal and it reveals the client's values, purposes and meanings. Concepts such as purpose and life goals are abstract and ambiguous. As May and Yalom (1989) point out, some individuals may not have a clear purpose or life goals. Life task, on the other hand, refers to what the client is doing and wants to do. It can be clearly described and studied empirically (Little, 1983; Cantor, et. al, 1991). Frankl (1967) recognizes the sustaining power in striving towards an uncompleted life task: "Nothing helps man to survive and keep healthy like the knowledge of a life task" ( p.124).

The above three concepts cover the three main questions in meaning-centred counselling: **Why? How? and What?** Existential attribution is concerned with why one pursues certain activities or experiences certain difficulties. Existential coping is concerned with how one copes with problems that are unavoidable or beyond one's control. Life task is concerned with what one really wants from life. These three concepts are closely related to therapeutic goals.

### Therapeutic goals

In most cases, individuals seek counselling because they are unhappy with their life situation, feel dissatisfied with the way life is unfolding, and have difficulty handling life on their own. The general objective of counselling is to facilitate desirable change in clients, such as helping them to become more effective in coping with the demands of life and to feel better about themselves.

The contemporary culture of crass materialism and high technology, coupled with the disintegration of traditional values, has contributed to an increase of "existential neurosis" (Maddi, 1970; Yalom, 1980). The problem of meaninglessness is frequently encountered by therapists. Alcoholism, depression, suicide, obsessionism, sexual promiscuity, aggression, addiction and dare-devilry may all be viewed as futile attempts to escape from an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1992; Yalom, 1980). Meaning-centred counselling focuses on personal meaning as a basic issue in counselling.

Generally, therapists deal with cognitive, behavioral and affective problems. From the perspective of meaning-centred counselling, regardless of whether the problems are cognitive, behavioral or affective in origin, they are considered to be related to issues of personal meaning. Meaning-centred counselling focuses on the existential issues, which include a deeper understanding of personal problems, developing a more adaptive

and fulfilling meaning system, and realizing meaningful life tasks. More specifically, therapeutic goals are as follows. To:

- (1) help clients develop a deeper understanding of the cause of, as well as the reason for, their complaints. The aim is not so much to unearth some hidden childhood trauma as it is to gain insight about their core values, deep-seated beliefs, existential concerns as well as the inner workings of their minds.
- (2) help clients develop a set of positive meanings as the foundation upon which to build a fulfilling and productive life. They will learn to clarify their values and have clearer ideas of what they really want in life. Their dreams and aspirations are then translated into concrete life tasks and major life goals. Ivey, Ivey & Simek-Morgan (1993) point out that the primary focus of psychotherapy should be the discovery and fulfillment of personal meaning. Therefore, the counsellor seeks to understand not just the clients' needs but also the meaning and value of such needs.
- (3) equip clients with the necessary skills to cope effectively with life's many demands. They not only learn how to overcome internal as well as external obstacles to attain meaningful life goals, but also learn how to live productively in spite of certain unchangeable realities of life, such as suffering, aloneness and anxiety. Meaning-centred counselling emphasizes the importance of inner resources such as meaning, optimism and spirituality in coping with the problems of human existence (Wong, 1993b).
- (4) provide social validation to facilitate the process of meaning actualization. The therapist not only provides social validation (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992), but also encourages clients to establish meaningful relationships which will provide validation outside the counselling situation.

The above objectives are designed to meet the three motivational needs for meaning, success and social validation. Clients' original complaints are often resolved or become more bearable once they have adopted a more positive outlook on life and developed more inner resources (Wong, 1993b).

These therapeutic goals are most likely to be accomplished when the counsellor possesses the necessary psychological expertise and has the capacity to encourage the clients in their quest for a more meaningful life. In meaning-centred counselling, the therapist is neither a passive, detached listener, nor an equal partner in problem solving. The role of the counsellor is best described as a coach, who provides clients with both skill training and inspiration. By virtue of his/her expertise, the therapist is expected to intervene effectively and provide competent professional help. Clients need to learn new coping skills and gain a deeper understanding of their difficulties. The therapist takes an active role in the counselling process. As does any committed coach, the therapist wants to see clients succeed in overcoming their difficulties and achieving their major life goals. S/he will cheer for every step of progress, and offer support for every setback. S/he is

tender-hearted in empathic listening and unconditional acceptance of each client, but s/he is also tough-minded in probing, questioning, confronting and challenging the client to live for meaning actualization. Meaning-centred counselling is both educational and motivational.

Successful meaning-centred counselling should yield the following outcomes. The clients will:

- (1) gain a deeper understanding of their presenting problems as well as their own values and meaning systems.
- (2) become more aware of the positive meanings of their daily activities and current life situations.
- (3) develop a set of core values that are worth living and dying for -- values that transcend self interests.
- (4) Formulate more realistic and meaningful life goals; they should develop some sort of concrete plan for the next three to five years.
- (5) Develop more effective ways of coping with life's problems and achieving meaningful goals.
- (6) Become more focused and more enthusiastic about major life tasks.
- (7) Advance towards meaning-validation. Progression typically involves three steps: acceptance of one's limitations and failings; affirmation of the positive aspects of self; and integration of both the negative and positive aspects of one's existence into a coherent and meaningful self
- (8) Enjoy better mental and physical health.

Meaning-centred counselling deals with the salient aspects of human existence, such as peoples' existential anxieties (May & Yalom, 1989), their ultimate concerns (Tillich, 1952), the meanings of life, death, work and love (Frankl, 1973b) and their inner resources (Wong, 1993b). Meaning-centred counselling is growth-oriented rather than problem-focused. It is more concerned with an individual's potential for growth and actualization than it is with his/her deficiencies and problems. According to meaning-centred counselling, if a person is motivated by the prospect of fulfilling life goals, many irritating problems will either disappear or become more tolerable. This positive orientation has been emphasized by other existential psychotherapists. For example May (1967) points out that "Our chief concern in therapy is with the potentiality of the human being. The goal of therapy is to help the patient actualize his potentialities." (p. 109).

### Therapeutic techniques

Meaning-centred counselling uses many of the same techniques as do other approaches to psychotherapy, such as listening skills, empathy, challenging, and problem-solving. However, the following techniques are particularly important in achieving meaning-validation.

(1) **Contextualizing the problem.** During the assessment stage of counselling, we want to explore and assess the problem that has brought the client to the counselling situation. However, it is important to place the problem in the context of the client's present and overall life situation. Following the gestalt principle, the true meaning of individual parts become clear only when viewed from the perspective of the larger picture as a whole. Counsellors may ask questions, such as: How is this related to other problems? What other problems have you experienced lately? How important is this issue as compared to your other concerns? Assuming the worse possible scenario, how will this affect you? What difference will it make in your life and your future? Have you tried to look this problem from the perspective of your partner or a total stranger?

Contextualizing goes beyond reframing and cognitive restructuring. It consists of placing the problem in the larger context of life as a whole and the cultural context of the presenting problem. It also emphasizes the finiteness and transitoriness of life; hence, the need to act responsibly. This therapeutic technique encourages the client to switch from the tunnel vision of a specific problem, to the global vision of new opportunities; from the intense, pessimistic view of a victim to a detached, optimistic view of a victor. Imagine an animal being tormented in a deadly trap; all of a sudden it realizes that the trap door is open and it can be free instantly if it chooses to. What a liberating and uplifting experience!

Contextualizing can be a very powerful therapeutic tool for the following reasons: First, the problem often becomes less disturbing once it is placed in a proper context. Second, becoming aware of all the other stressors a client is experiencing helps the therapist to understand why a seemingly minor problem could cause such a strong reaction. Third, the client is more likely to develop a balanced view of the problem as a result of viewing it from different perspectives. Fourth, by looking at the larger picture, the presenting problem may become insignificant in the context of the client's ultimate concerns. Fifth, the client recognizes that s/he has the freedom and responsibility to change for the better. Sixth, the client learns to look at things from a completely different perspective and consequently, the old problems disappear and life becomes an exciting new adventure.

(2) **Attributional probing.** Whereas contextualizing takes a broader view of the problem, probing takes an inside view. Cormier & Hackney (1993) write: "when we listen to the personal concerns of clients, we must seek to understand both life as they see it and the reason they see life as they do" (p. 3). We need to enter into clients' private world in order to understand their personal concerns and their idiosyncratic way of thinking and processing information. It is not good enough to point out to them that they

suffer from irrational beliefs and dysfunctional thinking. We need to understand the core processes responsible for their patterns of reasoning. Attributional probing means that we move beyond empathic listening and try to understand the logic behind causal and existential attributions.

Generally, clients have a strong interest in determining the causes of their presenting problems (Cormier & Hackney, 1993) because causal understanding facilitates problem-solving. However, attributional probing should move a step further into the area of reasons, meaning and purpose. When people engage in maladaptive behavior there is often good reason for it. The therapist needs to understand these reasons and point out to the clients that no matter how compelling these reasons may be, they have the effect of trapping them in self-destructive habits. For example, a battered woman may have good reasons to return to an abusive husband: "He needs me. Only I can help him change." The client needs to realize that repeatedly returning to her husband prolongs a dysfunctional and destructive relationship. The therapist needs to help clients to discover reasons for more satisfying and adaptive alternative behaviors.

With respect to the presenting problem, a number of questions can be asked to elicit existential attributions: Why does this problem bother you so much? Why do you feel that your whole life is finished if you cannot get back with your girl friend? Any idea how this has happened? Why did you come to this conclusion? Have you thought about other explanations? If the presenting problem is depression, the therapist will explore a variety of contributing factors, including present life situations, past trauma, cognitive schemas, medical conditions and the lack of positive meanings. If the complaint is about discontent with the present situation, the counsellor will inquire about various aspects of life, such as relationship difficulties, work problems, unmet needs and the lack of positive meanings that have brought about feelings of discontent.

With respect to the client's action, similar questions can be asked to probe for existential attribution: What is your reason for doing this? What do you intend to accomplish? To what end? Have you thought about alternative ways of reacting to the situation? People do not always have a clear idea of why they do certain things, or why they engage in self-destructive habits. This line of questioning is designed to increase the client's self-understanding of both conscious and unconscious motives that propel his/her behavior.

We need to realize that there need not be a reason for everything. Often, there are no adequate explanations why bad things happen. However, attributional probing serves three important functions. First, it reveals the deeper reasons for clients' problems, such as faulty assumptions, distorted logic, self-defeating attitudes and unresolved existential conflicts. Second, it enables the therapist not only to challenge specific irrational beliefs, but also to question some aspects of the meaning structure. Third, it paves the way for attributional retraining so that maladaptive attributions can be replaced by adaptive ones. For example, blaming the stars for one's own mistakes does not lead to desirable changes in the client, but taking ownership of one's mistakes does.

(3) **Life review and playing back.** This is the technique of reviewing the past in order to shed some light on the presenting problem. Our habitual patterns of actions and thoughts, our core processes and coping styles are products of past learning. It is difficult to achieve self-understanding without understanding the forces that have shaped the contour and the content of the self. Our deep-seated feelings of insecurity and persistent fears are often rooted in early childhood experience. Some have argued that we should focus on the present and should not be concerned about the past; but often the past is the cause of present problems. For example, hostility towards the opposite sex can often be traced to abuse, betrayal and painful relationships with the opposite sex in the past. If one feels very anxious in certain situations, playing back allows one to discover recurrent patterns in similar situations. Life review is a more systematic way of looking at the past; it is a powerful tool to achieve self-acceptance, self-affirmation and self-integration (Wong, 1995b; Wong & Watt, 1991). Positive meanings can be discovered through review of past experience.

Although Frankl does not explicitly advocate life review and playing back, his writings do emphasize the need of having the right attitude towards the past. We cannot change the past, but we can learn to accept and live with the past. Life review is a tool to bring about the adaptive attitude. Frankl (1967) particularly emphasizes the value of looking back in old age:

Even in advanced years one should not envy a young person. . . . Instead of possibilities in the future, the older person has realities in the past -- work done, love loved, and suffering suffered. The latter is something to be proudest of -- although it will hardly raise envy (p.31).

The adaptive functions of reminiscence in the elderly have been more fully treated by Wong (1995b).

Adler's (1963) individual psychology also emphasizes early childhood memory. He believes that mistaken meanings given to a situation in childhood can have important implications for present and future behaviors. We do not suffer from trauma as much as from the meanings we give to traumatic experiences. Early childhood memories are the keys to understanding mistaken meanings and faulty assumptions, both of which shape the whole personality.

(4) **Fast forwarding** -- This is the technique of using questioning and word pictures to depict likely scenarios given a particular choice. Life is a series of choices and clients need to be made aware of the irreversible consequences of some of their decisions. During the problem solving, goal-setting stage of counselling, we can ask such questions as: Are you sure this is what you really want to do? Why is it so important that you are willing to sacrifice your marriage for an affair? Is it really worth it? Where will it get you? Suppose you are able to get what you want, what will happen? What difference will it make to your life?



Fast forwarding is a visual, concrete way of teaching people to be responsible for the consequences of their decisions. According to Frankl (1959), responsibility means that since we have the freedom to make choices, we are responsible for the consequences of those decisions. Responsibility means that we need to be concerned about the needs of our friends, family, and society and not just of our self. Fast forwarding also incorporates the notion of paradoxical intention (Frankl, 1967). By asking clients to visualize the worst possible scenario, they learn that their worst fear is actually not so terrible after all.

(5) **Magical thinking** -- Most of the time, we are so preoccupied with our own limitations and pressing problems that we are not able to see the opportunities. Magical thinking enables us to transcend our present situations and consider new possibilities. To stimulate magical thinking, a series of miracle questions are asked: (a) If you were free to do whatever you want and money is not an issue, what would you like to do on a daily basis right now? (b) If God would grant you any three wishes, what would be your top three wishes? (c) If you were able to decide your future, what would be an ideal life situation for you three or five years down the road? Clients are encouraged to use imagery and visualization in answering these questions.

These three miracle questions open people's eyes to the desirable possibilities of life without having to worry about realities. The first question focuses on daily activities which are intrinsically valuable or enjoyable in their own right. The second question is concerned with one's utmost concerns and most cherished dreams. The third question has to do with wishes for the near future. These questions help reveal what clients really want and what would make life worth living. When answers to these questions all point in the same direction, we know that the clients have a pretty good idea about what they want and how to get there. For example, a person enjoys reading and writing on a daily basis, dreams about writing a best selling book, and hopes that s/he can make a comfortable living from writing.

Magical thinking promotes personal optimism or "future self-transcendence" (Sahakian, 1985). It is also related to "dereflection" (Lukas, 1984), because if clients change their focus to more positive things in life, they are often able to solve or tolerate their present problems.

By combining fast forwarding and magical thinking, the therapist can help clients gain insight into what they really want in life, and determine whether their values and life goals are self-defeating. For example, if a person just wants to eat, drink and be merry; yet dreams of becoming a famous movie star and making a lot of money in the next few years, s/he will need a dose of realism if s/he is to avoid disappointment. On the other hand, if a person is too depressed to mention a wish list, the counsellor will need to coax the client to think of desirable changes that would meet his/her most urgent needs, such as the lifting of feelings of depression, a better relationship with his/her spouse or an improvement in financial situations.

**(6) Constructing a Personal Meaning Profile** -- This is yet another technique that can help clients achieve a better understanding of what will make their lives meaningful. The therapist can explore with clients what kind of activities and goals endow their lives with meaning. The Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) can be used to identify the scope and depth of meaning in their present life situations. This exercise will also reveal whether they have a balanced life, and whether their current activities and goals are consistent with their values and aspirations.

Frankl (1959) identifies three modalities of meaning: activity, experience, and attitude. People typically find meaning in activities: an artist finds meaning in creative activities and a missionary finds meaning in sharing God's message of love and hope with unbelievers. Basically there are three types of meaning-providing activities: (a) activities that are intrinsically valuable and interesting, (b) activities that are instrumental in attaining significant goals, and (c) activities that are self-transcendent and directed at serving others.

The experience of beauty, truth, and love can also give one a sense of meaning. Such experiences give one feelings of joy and wonder. One may experience meaning in unexpected ways -- seeing a young mother pushing a stroller in the park and listening to the birds singing in the early morning hours can fill one's heart with gratitude and joy for being alive. One needs to develop a certain level of sensitivity in order to be surprised by epiphanies of meaning in common life situations.

Meaning can also be found by having the right attitude. In the face of suffering and loss, having the right attitude is often all we can do. Earlier, we mentioned existential coping, which includes the attitude of acceptance and the attitude of finding positive meanings in negative life events. A variety of attitudes can be cultivated to protect one's sense of dignity and worth.

The area of attitude offers the greatest promise in coping with suffering and other existential crises. To the extent that attitude can transcend present situations and past influence, there is a lot of room for creative acceptance and optimism. This type of attitude renders situations more tolerable even when they cannot be changed in any way. As Fabry (1968) suggests: "Suffering itself has no meaning; but a person can assume meaningful attitudes toward events which themselves are meaningless" (p. 46). Sahakian (1985) coined the phrase "future self-transcendence" to describe the human ability to transport oneself from the present helpless situation to a future environment where one is able to function as a productive and competent individual.

These three modalities of discovering meaning can be developed within each source of personal meaning. Thus, clients have a broad spectrum of meanings from which to choose. Fabry (1968) points out that each person can only answer for him/herself regarding the fundamental question of the meaning of life: "All the therapist can do is to elicit in the patient the widest range of meaning potentials, encourage him to make his choices, and educate him to make responsible choices" (p. 34). The task of the therapist is

to encourage clients to discover positive meanings in everyday situations and to create meanings by pursuing significant life tasks. Another aspect of this educational process is to focus on self-transcendence and achieve some balance in the sources of meaning.

(7) **Targeting and contracting** -- Throughout the duration of counselling, the therapist should work with clients to target specific changes to be made before the next session. The goals should be attainable and consistent with clients' meaning systems and life tasks. Clients may be asked to agree to complete certain assignments or practice some new skills each week. Contracting serves to demonstrate clients' good faith and seriousness in making desirable changes. The therapist will provide encouragement and coaching to ensure success. However, if clients repeatedly fail to fulfill their part of the contract, counselling should be terminated because no therapist can help clients who do not help themselves and have no intention to change.

(8) **Effective coping** -- An important part of meaning-centred counselling is to acquire effective coping strategies. Again the focus is twofold: meeting the demands of everyday life and fulfilling meaningful life goals. Although different problems require different coping strategies, the following two general principles will be emphasized: (a) the resource-congruence principle (Wong, 1993), and (b) the principle of existential coping. The first principle emphasizes the need to cultivate internal/external coping resources and adopt coping strategies that are congruent with the nature of the problem. The second principle involves learning to accept the realities of life and learning to see positive meanings in negative life events. More importantly, clients are encouraged to direct their energies to live a meaningful and productive life in spite of uncontrollable negative feelings and negative circumstances.

(9) **Overcoming the Achilles' heel** -- We are our own worst enemy. Often, we shoot ourselves in the foot and then look for the hidden sniper. A single character defect or one bad habit can undo our best intentions and efforts. The tragedy is that denial and other defense mechanisms make us blind to our own fatal flaws. Even when we realize that we have a problem, we belittle its seriousness or rationalize its inevitability. Often, we think that we can solve the problem by changing jobs or starting over in a new city. There is no escape from the enemy within, however; sooner or later the same problem will catch up to us.

Most of us fail to attain our life goals, not because of insurmountable obstacles or lack of opportunities, but because of something within us that holds us back from developing our full potential or sets us on a path of self destruction. The worst kind of wound is self-inflicted, because no one can protect us from repeatedly hurting ourselves. Counselling can be a powerful tool for everyone, because it enables us to discover and destroy the enemies hidden inside the Trojan horse. An experienced counsellor can detect the Achilles' heel by discovering the recurrent patterns of personal difficulties. Once a fatal flaw is identified, attempts will be made to understand its origin and implement an appropriate plan of intervention, which typically involves developing new attitudes,

adopting a more adaptive meaning system, and learning new ways of reacting to temptations.

An astute reader will notice that questioning is given a prominent role in most of the intervention techniques described here. Good listening skills involve more than accurate feedback and interpretation; they must also include the discovery of deeper meanings. Questioning plays a central role for a variety of therapeutic goals -- from exploring the nature of a presenting problem to clarifying the nature of desired changes. The therapist also needs to understand the underlying meaning of the aspiration and the lifestyle of the client. Questions on meaning and attributional probing are aimed at attaining this understanding. Adler (1931) points out that:

Understanding a style of life is similar to understanding the work of a poet. A poet must use words; but his meaning is more than the mere words he uses. The greatest part of his meaning must be guessed at; we must read between the lines . . . The psychologist must learn to read between the lines; he must learn the art of appreciating life-meanings (p. 58).

One common thread running throughout all of the above intervention techniques is a focus on the existential issues of the whole person. Although existential interventions involve cognitive and behavioral strategies, they also deal with values and meaning systems. The overall goal is not the solution of the presenting problem, but the development of a more positive and meaningful approach to living.

### Counselling implications

Meaning-centred counselling has important implications for different areas of counselling. Although it is similar to existential/humanistic psychology in its emphasis and similar to cognitive therapy in treatment, meaning-centred counselling has certain unique features that add a new dimension to traditional areas of counselling.

Career counselling. Traditionally, career counselling has focused on vocational choice and career development. In recent years, career planning has become increasingly difficult because most professions have become highly competitive; only a very small percentage of individuals can get into the prestigious professions. The job market is also undergoing rapid change. Many existing jobs are likely to become obsolete because of technological advancements. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to be prepared for just one occupation. A straight career path has become a rarity and job security has become a thing of the past. Most people have to change their careers three or four times. Another new trend is that many people have to hold down two or three jobs in order to make a living. Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult for university graduates to find jobs related to their fields of training.

In the midst of these trends, one needs to be more concerned with doing something meaningful with one's life, than with career advancement. The meaning of work needs to be redefined. Raines & Day-Lower (1986) point out that work is more than a means of making a living or getting rich. To the multitudes who are unemployed, under-employed, and alienated by meaningless jobs, an emphasis on career advancement only serves to breed discontent. They need a broader and nobler concept of work -- work which defines who they are and what they do with their lives.

In work and through work we humans express our human essence. And over time we transform and evolve that essence -- biologically, technologically, and also religiously. We begin to see, therefore, just what it means to speak of work. Work is not first of all what we do to "make" a living. Work *is* human living -- human being and human becoming (Raines & Day-Lower, 1986, p. 15-16)

From the perspective of meaning-centred counselling, work means more than economic productivity and career development; it also means pursuing one's unique mission in life. Ideally, career and mission coincide. For example, a missionary medical doctor is able to combine his/her medical career with the calling to serve in a foreign mission field. However, in many cases, one's job has little to do with one's calling. Meaning-centred career counselling maintains that one can lead a fulfilling life without a successful career in terms of getting into a prestigious profession and moving up the ladder. Conversely, it is also likely that one may have a very successful career, but miss one's true calling.

Meaning-centred career counselling has a dual-emphasis on career goals as well as on life goals, even when the two sets of goals do not always overlap. This approach increases life satisfaction, and fosters a more ethical social climate. Careerism breeds greed and selfishness, while a meaning-orientation promotes generosity and good citizenship. Career counselling should be broadened to life planning (Zunker, 1994), because the pursuit of meaningful life goals is more comprehensive than career choice.

Individual values as a synthesizing force in decision making and career selection have long been recognized (Gelatt, 1962; Katz, 1963, 1966). The present model goes beyond implicit value systems to explicit meaningful goals; it considers a career path as only one aspect of life work, and one of the several avenues of meaning validation.

Recently, a successful manufacturer told me that his purpose in life is not to make pots of money, because he already has more money than he can ever spend in a life time. "I work very hard," he said, "because I want to give something back to society. My calling in life is to provide jobs and create beautiful and well made furniture for people to enjoy". The importance of meaning can also be illustrated by the story of three construction workers involved in building a cathedral -- one just works for the money; the second worker takes pride in his workmanship, and the third worker feels honored that he

has a role in building the cathedral. His work becomes a labor of love and an act of worship. Which of these three workers has the greatest work satisfaction?

Life is meaningless when there is no meaningful work. Solomon once asked: “What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 2: 22). Thus, the focus of career counselling shifts from career development to meaningful life work. From this perspective, career planning typically includes three components: (1) develop marketable skills to make a living; (2) develop personal potential to broaden career opportunities; and (3) develop meaningful goals to fulfill one’s unique mission in life.

Developmental counselling. Meaning-centred counselling also provides new insights into developmental crises (Wong, 1995c). The task of constructing a satisfactory meaning system is a never ending process because it needs constant revisions as one goes through the life cycle. What was important in youthful years may become insignificant in old age. As Jung (1933) points out: “we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning” ( p. 108).

There are unique crises and challenges associated with each stage of development. Youth tend to be infected with **idealism**. In their innocence and confidence, they dream great dreams -- they want to change the world; they aspire to make a great contribution. The danger is that their idealism is often based on fantasy rather than self-knowledge. Unfortunately, dreams die hard; without proper counselling, young people may suffer many disappointments until they can no longer deny the harsh reality of their own limitations and external constraints.

Another peril of youth is **cynicism**. Those who have not had a great deal of positive experience at school or in the job market may have lost faith in the system. They do not believe that the future will be any better. Consequently, they only live for the present -- doing whatever they can to find pleasure. The challenge in counselling is to overcome cynicism with hope and purpose -- to instill a sense of confidence that they can still shape their future.

During middle age, the twin dangers are **stagnation** and **desperation**. Our preoccupation with financial security and our efforts to meet the demands of marriage and family eventually rob us of whatever idealism we had in youthful years. As the evening of life draws near, we find ourselves trapped in situations we no longer enjoy, and yet most of us are too afraid to leave. In order to overcome stagnation and the fear of aging, some resort to desperate acts which, more often than not, are self-destructive. The challenge in counselling is to clarify one’s life goals and decide how to make the best use of remaining years to fulfill these goals.

As we grow older, especially when we are close to retirement, a sense of **hopelessness** begins to creep up on us because of dwindling opportunities. We feel we are being pushed aside as useless relics of the past, even though we still have much to offer to society. Increasingly visible signs of aging, coupled with declining vitality, constantly remind us that there is little we can do to stop the downward slide. At this point, it is easy to give up our unfinished life tasks and succumb to feelings of pessimism.

An added burden of aging is the growing sense of **meaninglessness**. Time is running out. The stark reality of personal death threatens to nullify all that has been accomplished, reducing existence to nothingness. Looking back can also be painful, when the past is stocked with more failure than success, more regrets than gratitude. Unresolved emotional issues and unfulfilled dreams can make one feel like a failure. Diminished opportunities for meaningful work and social connectiveness further intensify our feelings of emptiness and futility. Life review has been shown to be an effective way of combating meaninglessness in old age (Butler, 1963; Wong, 1995b; Haight & Webster, 1995). Existential and religious coping are also particularly suited to dealing with meaninglessness and hopelessness.

Many research questions can be raised regarding the evolving meaning structure across the life span. For example, the specific contents of the cognitive and motivational components in each stage of development are worth investigating. The effectiveness of meaning-centred counselling in dealing with developmental crises relative to other models of counselling also calls for systematic research.

Cross-cultural counselling. The increasing presence of immigrant and ethnic communities in North America has given impetus to cross-cultural counselling. Meaning-centred counselling pays special attention to cross-cultural differences, to the extent that personal meaning is shaped by culture. Beliefs and values are formed and transmitted through the socialization process and various forms of cultural media. Ivey et. al (1993) point out that since the very definition of meaning depends on ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the therapist needs to be prepared to deal with a variety of meaning and belief systems. To facilitate change in the client's meaning system, the therapist needs to understand the client's construction of the meaning of the world as well as the client's cultural tradition. Life tasks are differentially reinforced or sanctioned by society. Even the appropriateness of certain feelings are prescribed by specific cultures. Thus, all three components of the meaning system are subject to cultural influence.

Meaning-centred counselling goes beyond cross-cultural sensitivity; it seeks to understand the values and beliefs of the client's culture and uses counselling techniques that are appropriate to that culture. For example, the Chinese culture inhibits emotional expression (Sue and Sue, 1990); therefore, talking about feelings is less appropriate than discussing behavioral and situational difficulties.

By exploring what a presenting problem means to a client, the therapist gains a deeper understanding of how the problem is perceived from the client's cultural and

personal perspective. For example, the editorial decision of rejection with encouragement to revise and resubmit may be construed as a relatively positive outcome by many North American writers; however, to the Oriental, such rejection can be devastating, because it indicates failure and shame. Similarly, a crude joke may not mean very much to white Americans, but for minorities that suffer from low self-esteem, it may be construed as discrimination against their race. In short, the same event has different meanings to different cultures; what appears to be harmless to the majority culture may have very adverse effects on minorities.

### Pastoral/spiritual counselling

Meaning-centred counselling lends itself readily to pastoral and spiritual counselling. Religion has long been considered an essential ingredient of counselling. According to William James (1902), “When we see all things in God, and refer all things to Him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning” (p. 475). Carl Jung (1938) goes so far as to believe that no one can find healing or meaning without religious beliefs: “No matter what the world thinks about religious experiences, the one who has it possesses the great treasure . . . that provides him with some of life’s meaning and beauty” (p. 113). Rollo May (1940) concurs that a religious orientation is a necessary condition for finding meaning, because religion endows life with meaning, while atheism is “a denial of meaning in life” (p. 29-30). May (1989) also suggests that “Christianity articulates a pattern of meaning in nature, and a vision of the essential goals of human life, that guides its believers on their difficult path” (p. 33). Wong (1993a) points out that religious beliefs not only provide answers to many existential concerns, such as the ultimate meaning of life, they also contribute to the development of personal values. In exploring sources of meaning, it is natural to consider religiosity and spirituality as a mainspring of ultimate meaning.

### Case study

To illustrate how meaning-centred counselling works, a composite case study is briefly presented.

Mike and Sandy have been married for almost thirty years. Their children have grown up and left home. They have a very profitable dry goods store, which they took over from her parents about 10 years ago. She keeps the books and he does the buying and selling. They are currently facing a marital crisis. Following the discovery of Mike’s infidelity, Sandy feels betrayed, humiliated and devastated. She has been going through deep emotional trauma, trying desperately to cope with her pain, anger and despair. However, she is willing to forgive Mike and take him back if he is willing to change his ways and remain faithful from now on, even though she feels she can no longer trust him. She firmly believes that a marriage cannot survive without exclusiveness and fidelity.

Mike feels that the whole thing has been blown out of proportion. He does not want a divorce, but he does not want to give up sexual flings either. To him, an



occasional affair is “no big deal” -- it satisfies his sexual needs and makes him feel young again, but it does not undermine his love towards his wife. According to Mike, the other women mean nothing to him; they are simply playthings or sexual objects, but his wife means everything to him. “Sandy is my best friend, and my business partner,” he confesses, “We have gone through thick and thin together all these years. I don’t think I can go through life without her.”

Both Mike and Sandy like music and eating out. They enjoy going to concerts and dining in expensive restaurants. Their business is doing well and their two daughters are married. Although life has been treating them well, Mike has grown increasingly restless and discontented. He feels that there has to be more to life than looking after the store. He also feels that his sex life with Sandy has degenerated from perfunctory routines to unpleasant obligations, because Sandy is never turned on by sex and he is no longer interested in her sexually. From time to time, he seeks casual sexual encounters as a release for all his frustrated libido. Sandy admits that their sex life has not been great, but insists that marriage is about love, caring and commitment, which are far more important than sex.

During the assessment stage, existential probing and contextualizing techniques are used in order to understand why Mike is obsessed with sex, and why Sandy is devastated by his infidelity. He realizes that one-night stands are not much fun and that sex is merely a diversion from an otherwise empty, meaningless existence. She realizes that her catastrophic reaction is partly due to her pride and partly due to her fear of aging. They also come to see their marital problem as part of the adaptation process to mid-life crisis.

During the stage of problem solving and goal setting, several themes are explored. After an intense discussion of the meaning of love and marriage, both recognize that true love is a precious gift to be nourished and cherished. Receiving love contributes to meaning, because “without effort or labor -- by grace, so to speak -- a person obtains that fulfillment which is found in the realization of his uniqueness and singularity” (Frankl, 1973b, p.132). Similarly, meaning is also realized by loving another person, when the lover transcends the self and focuses on the essence of the object of love. “This essence is ultimately independent of existence. . . . that is why love can outlast the death of the beloved; in that sense we can understand why love is stronger than death: (Frankl, 1973b, p.137). Placed beside this sublime, lofty view of true love, casual sex pales in significance and in attraction.

The theme of conscious responsibility is also emphasized. Given that life is lived only once and that we cannot relive the past, or live forever, we have to act in a responsible manner. In the context of a limited life, we have to make the most of our lives, and make responsible choices. There is something which we “ought” to do -- doing the right thing and making the right decision in each situation. They realize that the solution to the marital conflict comes from making responsible choices. For Mike, he has to choose between momentary sexual excitements and long lasting satisfaction; between

catering to his own desires and caring for Sandy's feelings and needs; between facing old age alone and growing old together with someone who really loves him. For Sandy, she has to choose between accepting a husband with a cheating heart and the prospect of living alone; between fears of betrayal and fears of loneliness. Fast forwarding is used to depict the different scenarios associated with various choices. Considering the terrible cost of infidelity, Mike decides that it is selfish and irresponsible to put Sandy through the wringer and risk his marriage just for a few moments of cheap thrill. He decides that the only responsible course of action is to remain faithful to Sandy and save his marriage.

Both come to the conclusion that staying together means a great deal to them and they would do anything to save their marriage. They are able to work out some compromise regarding sex. On his part, he is willing to use erotic stimulus and fantasies to improve his sex life. On her part, she is willing to be more responsive to his sexual needs.

The Personal Meaning Profile is used to discover what makes their lives meaningful. It is clear that they do not derive any meaning and satisfaction from the business they have taken over from Sandy's parents. Miracle questions reveal that they feel stagnant and are ready for new challenges. By exploring the possibilities of new adventures, they become excited about what they can do to fulfill their dreams. He has always wanted to complete his university education and become a teacher; she has always been interested in becoming a counsellor. They discover that their callings are more in human services than in the retail business. Now that they are financially secure, they are finally able to pursue their dreams. Their immediate goal is to inquire about opportunities for further education and to begin taking courses. Their next goal is to sell their business and invest the money to finance their education. With a new sense of purpose and renewed intimacy in their marriage, the problem of infidelity is no longer an explosive issue.

### Conclusions

The present model of counselling makes personal meaning the focal point of assessment and intervention. It helps clients to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of presenting problems and encourages them to pursue meaningful life goals. This dual emphasis is intended to promote self-validation. Assuming the role of a coach, the therapist also provides social validation to the clients. This model seems uniquely suited to addressing the pressing needs for meaning and purpose in a society that faces unprecedented change and the disintegration of traditional values. As a model of counselling, it speaks directly to the salient issues of everyday living and the ultimate concerns of human existence.

One of the hypotheses of the model is that individuals who have a clear sense of meaning and purpose are more likely to cope effectively with whatever difficulties they may have. This moderator hypothesis highlights the central role of meaning in stress resistance and personal growth. This hypothesis can be readily subjected to empirical test.

A number of cognitive techniques are introduced here to achieve the therapeutic goals of meaning-centred counselling. These techniques are based on established psychological principles and can be readily acquired by mental health professionals.

However, there are also limitations. This model most likely would not appeal to individuals who dismiss personal meaning as a relevant concept. Not all individuals are concerned with why questions (Why do I live?) and how questions (How should I live?). Some clients may not be receptive to meaning-centred counselling. However, even these individuals need to understand the values that guide their decisions and that their lives can be enriched by embracing meaningful life tasks.

Yalom (1980) suggests that not all cultures are concerned with meaning and purpose:

The Eastern world never assumes that there is a “point” to life, or that it is a problem to be solved; instead, life is a mystery to be lived. The Indian sage Bhaqway Shree Rajneesh says, “Existence has no goal. It is pure journey. The journey in life is so beautiful, who bothers for the destination?” Life just happens to be, and we just happen to be thrown into it. Life requires no reason (p. 470).

Even these Eastern cultures are concerned with the meanings of life, suffering, and death. Individuals in these cultures are also motivated to find inner peace and fulfillment. By tapping into the beliefs and value systems of Eastern cultures, meaning-centred counselling can help them clarify their own thinking regarding their need to experience life in a meaningful and fulfilling way.

It is also difficult to practice meaning-centred counselling with clients who have difficulty articulating their ideas and who are not used to thinking in terms of abstract concepts such as meaning and purpose. With this type of client, experience and skill are needed to communicate the principles of meaning-centred counselling in simple language and with concrete examples.

Another criticism is that preoccupation with the quest for meaning may lead to frustration and generate anxiety. Meaning-centred counselling encourages clients to accept the healthy tension associated with existential search; it also equips clients to live productively in spite of feelings of anxiety and frustration. Furthermore, it helps clients to discover the limitless possibilities of experiencing positive meanings in trivial daily activities.

Meaning-centred counselling may also be criticized for not paying enough attention to problem-solving. It is true that a meaning-centred counsellor does not focus on specific problems, but concentrates on the larger picture and the underlying existential issues. However, it may be argued that solution-focused counselling often deals with symptoms, while meaning-centred counselling deals with the root cause. Ultimately, the

best solution is that the problem disappears by itself as the client becomes engrossed in meaningful pursuits.

On the positive front, the model integrates concepts and techniques from cognitive psychology with existential therapy. Key concepts of existential psychology and logotherapy are translated into cognitive processes that can be operationalized and subjected to empirical research. The most important contribution of the present approach is to introduce meaning as a legitimate subject-matter, not only for psychotherapy, but also for research in mainstream psychology; the need for such a shift has been recognized by a number of people (Bruner, 1990; Giorgi, 1987; Malm, 1993; Ryff, 1989).

Some of the problems that will be of crucial importance in the 21st century are aging, AIDS and euthanasia. Meaning-centred counselling is uniquely suited to meeting these challenges. People can find meaning in old age and in the face of death (Frankl, 1973b, Wong, 1989a, Wong, Reker & Gesser, 1994). Individuals living with AIDS and other chronic conditions can also find positive meanings (Coward, 1994; Giovinco & McDougal, 1994; Reed, 1991).

After reviewing the spiritual implications of logotherapy, Tweedie (1961) concludes that “Every argument in behalf of euthanasia crumbles before the dignity of man and the existential analysis of suffering” (p.144). Meaning-centred counselling, as an extension of logotherapy, affirms that with proper counselling, all individuals can learn to live with dignity, meaning and purpose even when they feel that their lives are not worth living because of suffering or loss of dignity. The present model not only provides a message of hope, but also prescribes psychological interventions to restore human dignity and meaning.

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