

Academic Article

A Simulated Interview with Viktor Frankl: Part 2 - Searching for meaning during times of despair

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Abstract

Viktor Frankl's approach to psychotherapy embraces some of the most difficult and complex problems encountered throughout life. Unlike many other forms of psychotherapy, Frankl confronts coping with tragic events, often shifting the focus onto meaning and proper attitudes. These notions are reviewed using a simulated interview format.

Throughout his career, Viktor Frankl has made numerous contributions to the field of psychotherapy, with his approach focused on a search for meaning that helps clients triumph over tragedy. Frankl relied on his life

experiences to learn, understand, respect, and manage situations that involve pain, tragedy, and death. The present manuscript explores Frankl's ideas with a reliance on his own words, using a simulated dialogue format.

Interview:

The goals of psychotherapy according to Viktor Emil Frankl (VEF) as interviewed by James C. Overholser (JCO)¹.

JCO: Let's get started again. What do you see as the major problems

¹ Frankl often used the word "he" when we might now prefer the nonsexist phrase "they", or "man" when we might prefer "human".

confronting society today?

VEF: "What threatens contemporary man is the alleged meaninglessness of life" (Frankl, 1958, p. 20).

"Today, the will to meaning is often frustrated" (Frankl, 1966d, p. 252). "Man is no longer told by drives and instincts what he must do. And in contrast to man in former times, he is no longer told by traditions and values what he should do" (Frankl, 1975, p. 91). "Soon he will not even know what he wants to do" (Frankl, 1963b, p. 27). "In an age of crumbling traditions ... ever more people are caught in a feeling of aimlessness and emptiness" (Frankl, 1966b, p. 26).

JCO: How could this come about?

VEF: "Consider today's society: it gratifies and satisfies every need – except for one, the need for meaning" (Frankl, 1978, p. 25). "Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for (Frankl, 1978, p. 21). "Our young people are caught in an existential vacuum, an inner void and emptiness" (Frankl, 1969, p. 39).

JCO: I have known people who cope with stress by shopping and buying. How does this style fit with your views?

VEF: "Our industrial society is out to satisfy every need" (Frankl, 1981, p. 77), "and in its desire to increase consumption it often creates needs in order to satisfy them" (Frankl, 1984b, p. 6), "but the most human of all human needs – the need to see a meaning in one's life – remains unsatisfied" (Frankl, 1987, p. 5).

JCO: So is a lack of meaning the primary form of pathology a psychotherapist needs to confront?

VEF: “No” (Frankl, 2000, p. 119). “The feeling of meaninglessness is not pathological” (Frankl, 1959, p. 162). “What is sick is not necessarily wrong” (Frankl, 2000, p. 75). “The will to meaning represents not only the most human phenomenon possible, but also that its frustration does not necessarily signify something pathological” (Frankl, 1958b, p. 85). “Man’s search for a meaning is ... the surest sign of being truly human” (Frankl, 1962b, p. 94).

JCO: Really? But I thought a lack of meaning underlies the sense of despair. How is this not pathological?

VEF: “Despair need not necessarily be pathological” (Frankl, 1958b, p. 84). “Despair is suffering without meaning” (Frankl, 1997a, p. 133). “I can see beyond the misery of the situation to the potential for discovering a meaning behind it, and thus to turn an apparently meaningless life into a genuine human achievement” (Frankl, 1997b, p. 46). “The striving to find a meaning in life is a primary motivational force in man (Frankl, 1967a, p. 20).

JCO: So everyone’s life has meaning?

VEF: “Yes, of course” (Frankl, 2000, p. 37). “The so-called life not worth living does not exist” (Frankl, 1958c, p. 36).

JCO: How does a therapist promote meaning in a client’s life?

VEF: “In my opinion meaning is something to be found rather than to be given” (Frankl, 1965, p. 57). “It is not the job of a doctor to give meaning to the patient’s life. But it may well be his task, through an existential analysis, to enable

the patient to find meaning in life” (Frankl, 1967b, p. 141). “Meaning must be found” (Frankl, 2004a, p. 9) “and it must be found by oneself” (Frankl, 1972, p. 88). “It is never up to a therapist to convey to the patient a picture of the world as the therapist sees it, but rather to enable the patient to see the world as it is” (Frankl, 1961b, p. 6). “A psychotherapist ... is neither a teacher nor a preacher” (Frankl, 1962c, p. 27). “He resembles an ophthalmologist more than a painter” (Frankl, 1962c, p. 27). “We ... broaden his field of vision so that he will become aware of the full spectrum of the possibilities” (Frankl, 2010, p. 89). “The therapist merely assists him in this endeavor” (Frankl, 1960a, p. 11).

JCO: How does all of this work?

VEF: “We ... promote the patient to that point where he spontaneously finds meaning” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 10). “The more one is immersed and absorbed in something or someone other than oneself the more he really becomes himself” (Frankl, 1975a p. 79). “Only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centered interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence” (Frankl, 1960a, p. 13).

JCO: So a person should aim for self-actualization?

VEF: “Actually, man’s concern is not to fulfill himself or to actualize himself, but to fulfill meaning and to realize value” (Frankl, 1959, p. 160). “The more one is immersed and absorbed in something or someone other than oneself the more he really becomes himself” (Frankl, 1975, p. 79).

JCO: In your opinion, what is the best pathway to find meaning?

VEF: “We may find meaning in our lives through deed, through work, through achievement and accomplishment, through creativity” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 11). “Most important, however, is ... that of attitudes” (Frankl, 1980, p. 8). “If we cannot change a situation that causes our suffering, we can still choose our attitude” (Frankl, 1980, p. 8).

JCO: In your view, how can therapy help clients to battle their depression?

VEF: “Man yearns for a reason to be happy” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 9). “If man can find and fulfill a meaning in his life he becomes happy” (Frankl, 2004b, p. 94).

JCO: But today, unemployment rates are high, clients are struggling financially, and many people suffer from depression.

VEF: “Depression does not entirely depend on whether people are employed or not, but rather on whether they consider their lives meaningful or not” (Frankl, 1984b, p. 6). “There is also an existential emptiness, and this we find in people with work and without work, in spite of work, and sometimes even because of work” (Frankl, 1984b, p. 6).

JCO: Really? Emptiness continues despite successful employment?

VEF: “It is possible to be caught in existential despair despite full success” (Frankl, 2010, p. 148). “In ‘Executive’s Disease’ the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated by the will to power” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 125). “In addition to this” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 43) “the Sunday neurosis ... when the rush of the busy week stops on Sunday and the void

within them suddenly becomes manifest” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 125). “Not only during leisure but also in old age, man is faced with the problem of how he should fill up his time” (Frankl, 2010, p. 87).

JCO: So you feel the core problem in most cases of depression is a lack of meaning?

VEF: “Correct” (Frankl, 2000, p. 51). “Suicide proneness, violent behavior, and drug dependency, are, in fact, due to a lack, or loss, of meaning” (Frankl, 2010, p. 203).

JCO: What about other problems? Many clients struggle because of trauma and other major life events.

VEF: “Pain, death, and guilt are inescapable; the more the neurotic tries to deny them, the more he entangles himself in additional suffering” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 88). “Even if we are the helpless victims of a hopeless situation, facing a fate that cannot be changed, we may rise above ourselves, grow beyond ourselves, and by so doing change ourselves. We may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph” (Frankl, 1980, p. 8).

JCO: Some behavioral strategies argue that clients can combat their depression by engaging in pleasant activities each day.

VEF: “That is not true” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 8). “It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness” (Frankl, 1975, p. 85). “It is also similar to sleep: if a person is bodily and mentally relaxed he falls asleep automatically. If, however, he tensely and forcibly seeks sleep, this very tenseness makes any relaxation impossible, and consequently there can be no sleep” (Frankl, 1952, p. 128).

“The pursuit of happiness is self-defeating ... What man actually is concerned with is to have a reason to be happy” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 9).

JCO: I am confused. How does it work?

VEF: “I cannot explain it” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 9). “Pleasure is never the goal of striving, but only the effect which results when the striving obtains the desired goal” (Frankl, 1952, p. 128). “The more one aims at pleasure, the more his aim is missed” (Frankl, 1966a, p. 98). “Pleasure ... must remain, a side-effect, or by-product, of attaining a goal” (Frankl, 1966a, p. 98). “The harder a man tries to evade unpleasure, or suffering, the deeper he plunges himself into additional suffering” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 127).

JCO: So can we just say that happiness happens?

VEF: “Marvelous! That’s a good idea, not simplistic, but as simple as truth allows” (Frankl, 1969, p. 38). “Success and happiness must happen, and the less one cares for them, the more they can” (Frankl, 1988, p. 35). “The more one tries to gain pleasure, the less one is able to obtain it” (Frankl, 1966d, p. 253).

JCO: So what should a therapist do to help clients who are feeling overwhelmed by problems? Is Logotherapy the best approach?

VEF: “I do not wish to convey the impression that beneficial results were always obtained” (Frankl, 1960b, p. 527). “Logotherapy is not a panacea ... it is justified to combine logotherapy with other methods” (Frankl, 1967c, p. 150).

JCO: So you believe that attitude changes provide the key to effective therapy?

VEF: “Right” (Frankl, 1971a, p. 310). “Even the negative, the tragic aspects of human existence ... may be turned into something positive, something creative” (Frankl, 1972, p. 88).

JCO: What about something extreme, like when a young person dies?

VEF: “Life’s transitoriness does not in the least detract from its meaningfulness” (Frankl, 2010, p. 118). “We cannot, after all, judge a biography by its length, by the number of pages in it; we must judge by the richness of the contents (Frankl, 1955a, p. 53). “If life is meaningful, then it is so whether it is long or short” (Frankl, 1958c, p. 33).

JCO: So even when a life has been cut short, it can be important and meaningful?

VEF: “Right” (Frankl, 1990, p. 10). “If life is meaningful, then it is so whether it is long or short” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 128). “Death ... does not cancel the meaning of life but rather is the very factor that constitutes its meaning” (Frankl, 1955a, p. 56). “Consider a movie: it consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown” (Frankl, 1997a). “As the end belongs to the story, so death belongs to life” (Frankl, 1967a, p. 128). “Life has a meaning to the last breath” (Frankl, 1954, p. 976).

JCO: And therefore we all must learn how to deal with pain, death and suffering?

VEF: “Suffering is an ineradicable part of life” (Frankl, 1984a, p. 88). “When a man finds that it

is his destiny to suffer, ... his unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden" (Frankl, 1984a, p. 99). "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering" (Frankl, 1968a, p. 5).

JCO: So stress, conflict, and problems can be good things?

VEF: "You are right" (Frankl, 2010, p. 155).

JCO: So problems and struggles can be good because they test your character and make you stronger?

VEF: "Exactly!" (Frankl, in Scully, 1995, p. 4). "Stress is by no means always and necessarily pathogenic or disease producing" (Frankl, 2010, p. 222). "What man actually needs is not a tension-less state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him" (Frankl, 1962a, p. 112). "Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what he still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what he is and what he should become" (Frankl, 2010, p. 63).

JCO: How do you help clients adjust to pain, loss and mortality?

VEF: "Even the negative aspects of human existence such as suffering, guilt, and death can still be turned into something positive, provided that they are faced with the right attitude" (Frankl, 1967c, p. 144).

JCO: How does a person develop the 'right' attitude?

VEF: "Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (Frankl, 1984a, p. 135). "Man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but

rather to see a meaning in his life" (Frankl, 1984a, p. 136).

JCO: How can adversity be a good thing?

VEF: "Life becomes all the more meaningful the more difficult it gets" (Frankl, 1955a, p. 43). "The art of the sailor is his ability to use the wind in order to be driven in a given direction so that he is able to sail even against the wind" (Frankl, 1955a, p. 69). "Just as a small fire is extinguished by the storm while a large fire is enhanced by it – likewise a weak faith is weakened by predicaments and catastrophes, whereas a strong faith is strengthened by them" (Frankl, 1997a, p. 19).

JCO: Most people fear death and become quite upset when a loved one dies. What is your view about death and mortality?

VEF: "The fear of aging and dying is pervasive in the present culture" (Frankl, 2010, p. 118). "In some respects it is death itself that makes life meaningful" (Frankl, 2000, p. 29). "We do an injustice to death by believing that it deprives and robs life of meaning" (Frankl, 1990, p. 8).

JCO: but doesn't the ever-present threat of death have a harmful effect on people?

VEF: "In every moment the human person is steadily molding and forging his own character" (Frankl, 1961a, p. 7). "The essential transitoriness of human existence itself adds to life's meaningfulness. If man were immortal, he would be justified in delaying everything: there would be no need to do anything right now" (Frankl, 1971a, p. 307). "Only under the threat and pressure of death does it make sense to do what we can and

should, right now" (Frankl, 1990, p. 7). "Man resembles a sculptor who chisels and hammers the unshaped stone so that the material takes on more and more form ... he attempts to 'hammer out' the values in his life ... the sculptor has a limited span of time at his disposal for completing his work of art – but that he is not informed when his deadline is" (Frankl, 1955a, p. 53).

JCO: So we create our identity through our daily actions?

VEF: You are right" (Frankl, 2010, p. 155). "Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action" (Frankl, 1984, p. 98). "Man not only behaves according to what he is, he also becomes what he is according to how he behaves" (Frankl, 1967a, p. 35). "What he becomes – within the limits of endowment and environment – he has made himself" (Frankl, 1967a, p. 35). "One's own life is the answer to the question of the meaning of life" (Frankl, 2010, p. 46).

JCO: We might want to take another break. Would that be okay?

VEF: "Of course" (Frankl, 1974, p. 10). ☺

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