

# Retrospective Insights of a Father's Sense of Coherence and Logotherapy

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## **Abstract**

It appears that there are many fathers of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to be in a state of denial. The current paper explores retrospectively how a father's strong sense of coherence helps him in not only accepting his children with ASD but also becoming actively involved to make a positive difference. The lessons learnt should provide a potential framework to empower fathers to be overcomers. The study also reveals the potential of Logotherapy as a therapy and salutogenesis as an approach for fathers to move them from negativity (pathogenesis) to positivity (salutogenesis).

## **Prelude**

Both first and second authors are fathers who have faced challenging circumstances. The former has three children with autism, while the latter has journeyed through an extended time of unsuccessful efforts to save his son from a birth condition. Currently, the first author is working on parent training for his PhD, while his colleague, an assistant professor with Nanyang Technological University, is actively researching how best to help children with challenging learning and behavioural needs. The current paper is a joint effort of both authors in their attempt to share what works according to their findings from the perspective of a father's sense of coherence and from a counselor's perspective of a therapy that is promising for parents who may be still in a state of denial.

## **PART ONE:**

### **Salutogenesis: Sense of Coherence**

*Presented by Norman Kee Kiak Nam*

### **Retrospective Insights of a Father's Sense of Coherence**

Peer-reviewed research literature (Davis & Carter, 2008; Hoffman, Sweeney, Hodge, Lopez-Wagner, & Looney, 2009; Osborne & Reed, 2009; Mak, Ho, & Law, 2007) have reported

parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to have higher level of stress compared to parents of typically developing children. Moreover as ASD is a neurological disorder that affects the child for life, follow-up will be needed at home involving protracted processes of intensive training of ways considered unnatural for the child. The child will need to learn, adopt and internalize the interventions to circumvent the natural neurological disadvantages. In the process of helping, many fathers may face fatigue, failure and discouragement as the challenges of neurological disorders require protracted persistence and consistent action. Relapses of the child returning back to natural “old habits” instead of the newly taught foreign behaviors are expected from time to time. Faced with such prospects, fathers may grief and be in state of denial of the reality. My research on parent training for parents with children with special needs reveal that practically all the intervention programs do not consider parents mental health and capacity to follow-up with the intervention programs faithfully. There seems to be an implicit assumption that all parents are resilient and are able to follow-up with any interventions. My personal observations through encounters with parents of special needs children reveal otherwise where many are struggling and confounded with the neurological realities. The quest to discover studies on human resilience and self-efficacy lead me to a study by Aaron Antonovsky (1987) whom studied how people in spite of very trying, stressful and overwhelming circumstances (e.g., concentration camps internment, severe disability, loss of loved person, difficult economic conditions) still emerge mentally strong and functions well in society. He termed it as salutogenic orientation.

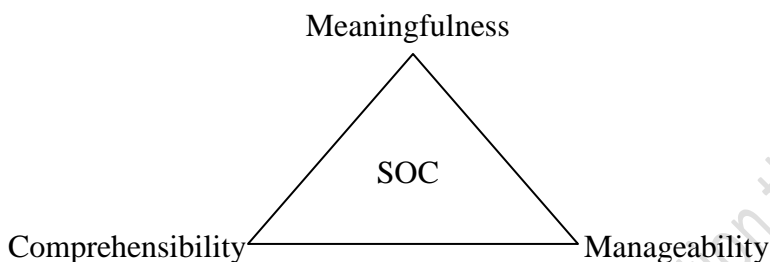
“Salutogenic orientation (which focuses on health) poses a radically different question: why are people located towards the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum, or why do they move towards this end, whatever their location at any given time?” (p. xii)

Antonovsky found the answer to the salutogenic question as people having strong “Sense of coherence”(SOC). His SOC has been very well studied with more than 458 scientific peer reviewed publications and 13 doctoral thesis from 1992-2003, where the “orientation to life questionnaire” has been used in at least 33 languages in 32 countries (Eriksson & Linstrom, 2005) for over the past 30 years (Hittner & Swickert, 2010; Honkinen, et al., 2009; Eriksson & Linstrom, 2007; Klepp, Mastekaasa, Sorenson, Sandanger & Kleiner, 2007). He defines SOC as:

“a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement” (p. 19).

Antonovsky identified three components in SOC which will be explicated from my retrospection as a parent with special needs children: meaningfulness, comprehensibility and manageability (see Figure 1.1).

*Figure 1.1*



### **SOC Component 1: Meaningfulness**

Antonovsky (1987, p. 18) considers meaningfulness as:

“...the importance of being involved as a participant in the process shaping one’s destiny as well as one’s daily experience. But was not until the interview protocols were studied that the significance of this component became apparent. I now see it as representing the motivational element. Those classified as having a strong SOC always spoke of areas of life that were important to them, that they very much cared about, that “made sense” to them in the emotional and not only the cognitive meaning of the term ”

### **How I found meaning? (Meaningful component of SOC)**

Together with my wife, we prayed for wisdom to know what we cannot change, change what we can and also wisdom to know the difference when we first discovered our second son has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We totally depended on God for guidance, direction and meaning in our situation. As the slogan for Nike goes, “Just do it!” We did all we can with whatever resources we have prudently and with deliberation on the consequences. Personally, the learning journey is with divine grace and is meaningful and fruitful. The experience transformed me from towards seeking and fulfilling meaning in life and not meaning of life. I found meaning in what I do, by doing it with passion and sense of purpose. Even though I may have made plans ahead of time, I am not bounded by it, as my life experiences testify unpredictability, uncertainty and change as the norm. What I found meaningful is to live one day at a time. I fulfill whatever that is possible and practical within a day. This reduces complexity in life to solving the challenges and needs to one day. After I have done my best for the day, I will go to sleep by imagining myself resting peacefully and safely in the palms of God, casting all my cares (whatever that is still undone and other unmet needs) to the divine God as I believe He is capable of taking over.

Perhaps for those who do not share my belief in God, meaning may arise through seeing positive and sustainable results that are significant for the child's well-being. My journey reveals that the need to be an effective mediator of the child's learning (Kee, 2011). "Right Belief" in believing that one is able to make a positive difference is critical (Feuerstein, et al., 2010). Garland and Howard (2009) found evidences from many neuroscience studies that the adult brain can continue to form novel neural connections and grow new neurons in response to learning or training even into old age (Draganski et al., 2004). Neuroplasticity research suggests that challenging learning experiences lead to brain development analogous to muscle tissue development. The findings imply that children with autism who are provided with appropriate experiences may develop abilities in their strength that may compensate for their weaknesses. For example, if they naturally lack the ability to read facial expressions, intensive teaching and training to read facial experiences will help them develop the ability over time as the neural connections develops.

We can learn and continue to learn throughout our lifetime. Neurogenesis can even occur through the act of imagining playing the piano (Pascual-Leone, Amedi, Fregni, & Merabet, 2005). The anterior insula in autism is under-connected and under-examined. It is involved in interoceptive affective and empathic processes, and emerging evidence suggest it is part of a "salience network" integrating external sensory stimuli with internal states (Uddin & Menon, 2009). As mediators, we should look for opportunities and persist to stimulate the child's development in whatever areas the child may be lacking through modes of learning or intelligences that are of their strength. Willis (2007) has even proposed brain-based teaching strategies for improving students' memory, learning, and test-taking success.

What understanding of intelligence would be useful and constructive for parents with autism to adopt in view of neuroplasticity? I will use Feuerstein, et al., 2010, p. 7) definition of intelligence as the ability to think adaptively in response to changes in our environment. This definition allows parents/caregivers to improve the child's intelligence by working on educating the child to think adaptively, with whatever tools, strategies and resources needed and using whatever time that may be needed to fulfill the goals. It is a more functional appropriate definition of intelligence depicting state rather than trait (Feuerstein, et al., 2006, p.74), implicating modifiability rather than stability. This allows all parents to have real hope, especially when Feuerstein's holistic approaches are practices that are validated from many academics worldwide over the years (Anton, 2009; Caffrey, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008; Isman & Tzurriel, 2008; Schur, et al., 2002; Skuy, 2002; Weitz, 2008; White & Dinos, 2010) and even by Singapore academics (Tan & Seng, 2005, 2008; Seng, Pou, & Tan, 2003) and professionals, for mainstream and non-mainstream students. There are certainly also researchers who do not subscribe to Feuerstein approaches (Frisby, 1993; Frisky & Baden, 1992; Gresham, 1986; Reynolds, 1986). Nevertheless, it remains a learning journey and a marathon.

Asian parents generally send their children for tuition if they can afford or coach them personally, to improve their child's "intelligence". Asians commonly believe that children in good classes or in good schools are smarter or more intelligent than their counterparts who are not. This implies that Asian parents generally do not believe that intelligence is fixed but modifiable. Perhaps, as a result, Asians are generally doing better in examinations than their western counterparts (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Parents of children with ASD should adopt "Right Belief" for development of meaning.

Ability to manage challenging behaviors, comprehend ASD and find meaning as caregivers will lead to perceived self-efficacy of parents which "refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments." (Bandura, 1997, p.3)

### **SOC Component 2: Comprehensibility**

Antonovsky (1987, p. 17) explains comprehensibility as:

"It refers to the extent to which one perceives the stimuli that confront one, deriving from the internal and external environments, as making cognitive sense, as information that is ordered, consistent, structured, and clear, rather than as noise-chaotic, disordered, random, accidental, inexplicable.

The person high on the sense of comprehensibility expects that stimuli he or she will encounter in the future will be predictable or, at the very least, when they do come as surprises, that they will be orderable and explicable. It is important to note that nothing is implied about the desirability of stimuli. Death, war, and failure can occur, but such a person can make sense of them."

### **How I found comprehensibility?**

Essentially a person with strong sense of comprehensibility can make sense of current experienced situation and has confidence of being able to make sense of future situations. When my second son was first diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), my wife and I had no idea of what it is. We felt a strong need to comprehend what ASD is and so I flew down the useful books from Amazon.com in five days to start to our quest to learn and understand it better. Together we attended all available meaningful conferences and practical training. Through our close collaboration and frequent mutual exchange of our understanding from the books, we gradually built our understanding of ASD. We learnt what is possible, what has to be respected and what is practical and within our financial means and resources. As pragmatic realist, we executed our shared deliberated actions with urgency and decisiveness. Dynamic assessment and timely adaptation was the order of the day. Eventually, we made sense of ASD and how best to work with our children. We still do face challenges but they are comprehensible.

### **SOC Component 3 : Manageability**

Antonovsky (1987, p. 17) defines manageability as:

“... the extent to which one perceives that resources are at one’s disposal which are adequate to meet the demands posed by the stimuli that bombard one. At one’s disposal may refer to resources under one’s own control or to resources controlled by legitimate others—one’s spouse, friends, colleagues, God, history, the party leader, a physician – whom one feels one can count on, whom one trusts. To the extent that one has a high sense of manageability, one will not feel victimized by events or feel that life treats one unfairly. Untoward things do happen in life, but when they do occur, one will be able to cope and not grieve endlessly.”

### **How I manage challenging behaviors? (Managing component of SOC)**

Our second son has sensory integration issues. Inappropriate behaviors such as cupping of ears, screaming in certain environments and tantrums were challenging. We learnt about sensory integration disorders and through trial and error developed ways to help our son modulate the sensory challenges he faced.

A good understanding of the “Culture of Autism” (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2004) helped us to create a conducive and positive learning environment which probably averted challenging behaviors. We created a structured environment where predictability and familiarity with a “Work System” as in the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children) (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2004).

Development of literacy involved comprehension of the six milestones and applying the Floor-Time approach as proposed by Greenspan and Weider (1998). They have produced three sets of DVDs to explain and coach parents on how to do the intervention. Picture Exchange Communication System (Bondy & Frost, 2002) was concurrently used to develop speech. Equipped with the means to communicate effectively, we faced less challenging behaviors due to frustration of inability to communicate.

Personally, I know we have drawn from our dependable from our divine source, unlimited supply of grace, wisdom and resources we need and want.

## **PART TWO:**

### **Logotherapy: Sense of Meaning**

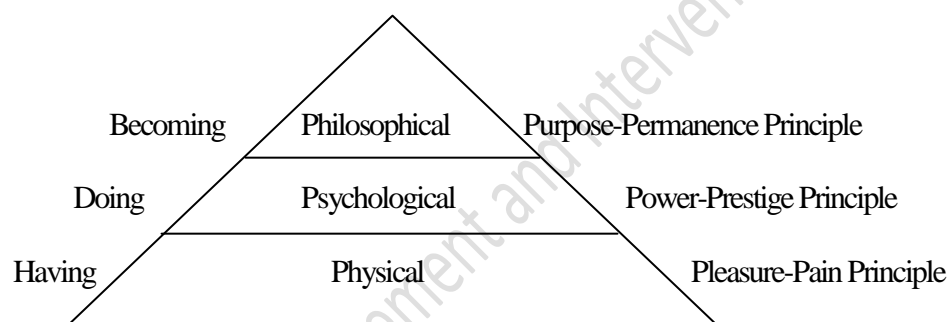
*Presented by Dr Noel Chia Kok Hwee*

### **What is Logotherapy?**

The development of Logotherapy (or Existential Analysis) dates back to the 1930s and was founded by an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, Dr Viktor Frankl (1905-1997). It is often called the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy besides Psychoanalysis founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Individual Psychology founded by Alfred Adler (1870-1937).

Briefly, Logotherapy is a term derived from *logos*, a Greek word that translates as “meaning.” Therapy is defined as treatment of a disorder, sickness or maladjustment. Frankl’s theory is founded on the belief that human nature is motivated by the search for a purpose in life. DeVille (2010) has defined Logotherapy as spiritual well-being: “the synthesis of existential psychology and metaphysical philosophy that is pleasurable, powerful and permanent enough to sustain your life along lines of excellence in good times and bad” (p.1). In other words, DeVille (2009, 2010) sees Logotherapy as a psycho-spiritual system relating to the human motivational pyramid to combine the physical, psychological and philosophical drives of life (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1



### Fundamental Concepts of Logotherapy

Logotherapy is the pursuit of that meaning for one’s life. At the heart of Logotherapy are three philosophical and psychological concepts:

1. Life has meaning under all circumstances.
2. People have a will to meaning.
3. People have freedom under all circumstances to activate the will to meaning and to find meaning.

These three concepts form the basic assumptions of Logotherapy as follow:

1. **Freedom of Will:** Everyone of us is not fully subjected to conditions but is basically free to decide and capable of taking our own stance towards internal (psychological) and external (socio-biological) conditions. Freedom is defined as the space of shaping our own life within the limits of the given possibilities. This freedom derives from the spiritual dimension (*nous*, an ancient Greek word without an exact English equivalent) of the person, who is understood as the essentially human realm, over and above the dimensions of body (*soma*) and mind (*psyche*). As a noetic (a term derived from *nous*)

person, anyone of us is not just a reacting organism but an autonomous being capable of actively shaping our own life.

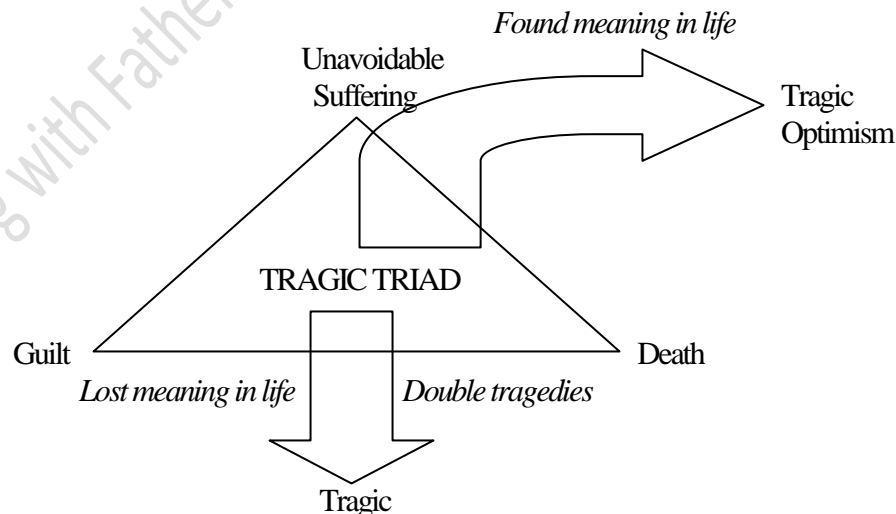
2. **Will to Meaning:** We are not only free, but more importantly, we are free to something, and this is namely, to achieve goals and purposes. According to Frankl (1997), the quest for meaning is seen as our primary motivation as human beings. When we fail to realize our Will to Meaning in our lives, we will experience a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness. Frankl (1997) termed it as existential vacuum. As a result, we experience frustration of the existential need for meaningful goals that, in turn, will give rise to aggression, addiction, depression and suicidality. It may even engender or increase psychosomatic illnesses and neurotic disorders.
3. **Meaning in Life:** Meaning is an objective reality as opposed to a mere illusion arising within the perceptual apparatus of the observer. When a event or episode demands our attention, on the grounds of our freedom and responsibility, we somehow bring forth the possible best in ourselves and in the world, by perceiving and realizing the meaning of the moment in each and every situation.

### The Tragic Triad in Life

Life is never a bed of roses as we have often been told. Indeed, it is never. Accidents and crimes can happen anywhere and everywhere. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, volcano eruptions, tsunami ... as well as man-made disasters such as collapses of the Hotel New World and the Nicoll Highway have happened. We have witnessed and/or experienced wars, civil unrests and political clashes. Such events can be tragic for many or some of us depending on we were during such unfortunate moments.

In other words, life is dynamic and we continue to encounter all the time with elements of what Frankl (1979) has termed it the Tragic Triad: unavoidable suffering, guilt and death (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2



Pessimism

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If we come out of the tragic event stronger, we have experienced what Frankl (1979) has described as tragic optimism. For instance, the late Dr Bernard Rimland was devastated when he learnt that his son was autistic. That was back in the 1950s. Autism was something new and rare. For a moment in his life, Dr Rimland struggled to accept the diagnosis. Later, he decided that feeling lost and pitiful would not help. He went on to found the Autism Research Institute and devoted the rest of life into researching on autism as he attempted to find a cure for the disorder. That is tragic optimism. Although he never did find the cure, the institute he had founded has helped and benefited thousands of families on how they can best manage themselves as they cope with their family members born with autism.

However, if we have chosen to go into depression, when face with an unfortunate event in life, moving on a downward spiral from a sense of helplessness into a sense of hopelessness, we are sure to experience tragic pessimism – what I would term as *double tragedies* (i.e., tragedy + pessimism). To illustrate what I mean, my late son was born with a congenital condition which was difficult to rectify even though we have made great medical advancements today. That is a tragedy. Then came the many advices from various medical specialists telling my wife and I that there was nothing much they could do. That is pessimism. Spending a lot of time and effort searching through medical literature and seeking many medical advices brought us to a dead end. There was unlikely a cure for my son's condition. With tragedy and pessimism put together, what my family had gone through is double tragedies.

The best way to find meaning in life – especially in a situation we can never change – is to change our attitude. A new meaning will often dawn on us by doing so. I shall discuss this in the next part below.

### **The Quest for Meaning in Life**

With the fundamental concepts of Logotherapy in place, the next step is to find meaning in life. Frankl (1979, 2000) has identified two levels of Meaning in Life:

#### ***Level 1: Meaning of the Moment***

It is important for us to understand the meaning of each moment of our life by fulfilling the demands that life has entrusted to us since we have all the time to respond to the questions that life asks us.

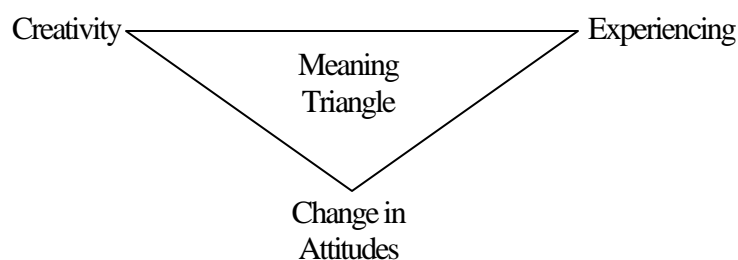
#### ***Level 2: Ultimate Meaning in Life***

According to Frankl (2000), this meaning is something we can never attain. However, we can catch a glimpse at the horizon ... be it God for the believers, but for the non-believers, it can be science in our quest for truth, nature and evolution, for instance.

The question of this quest is *How?*

Frankl (1979) has proposed three ways to find meaning in life that form the Meaning Triangle (see Figure 2.3): creativity, experiencing and change of attitudes.

Figure 2.3

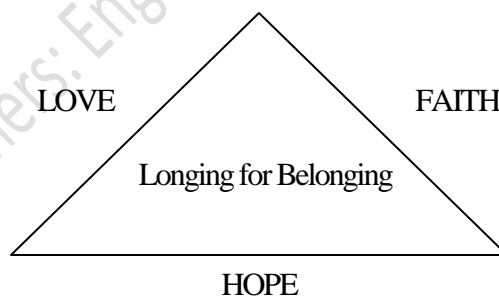


1. Creativity: This refers to giving something to the society/world through self-expression such as using our different talents/gifts by giving to life.
2. Experiencing: This concerns receiving from the society/world through our relationships and interactions with others or through nature, culture as well as our responses to and from our environment.
3. Change in attitudes: This concerns the choice we make in our attitude towards a condition even though we are unable to change a situation/circumstance. According to Frankl (1979, 2000), this is a self-transcendent approach in finding meaning in life even in an unavoidable situation of suffering.

### **Longing for Belonging**

While Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) focused on our yearning for meaning in life, DeVille and DeVille (2010) have added the longing for belonging with people whom we share faith, hope and love, combining the focus of Logotherapy on personal meaning with their emphasis on situations and relationships where one belongs emotionally, is accepted, loved and trusted in places of the heart (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4

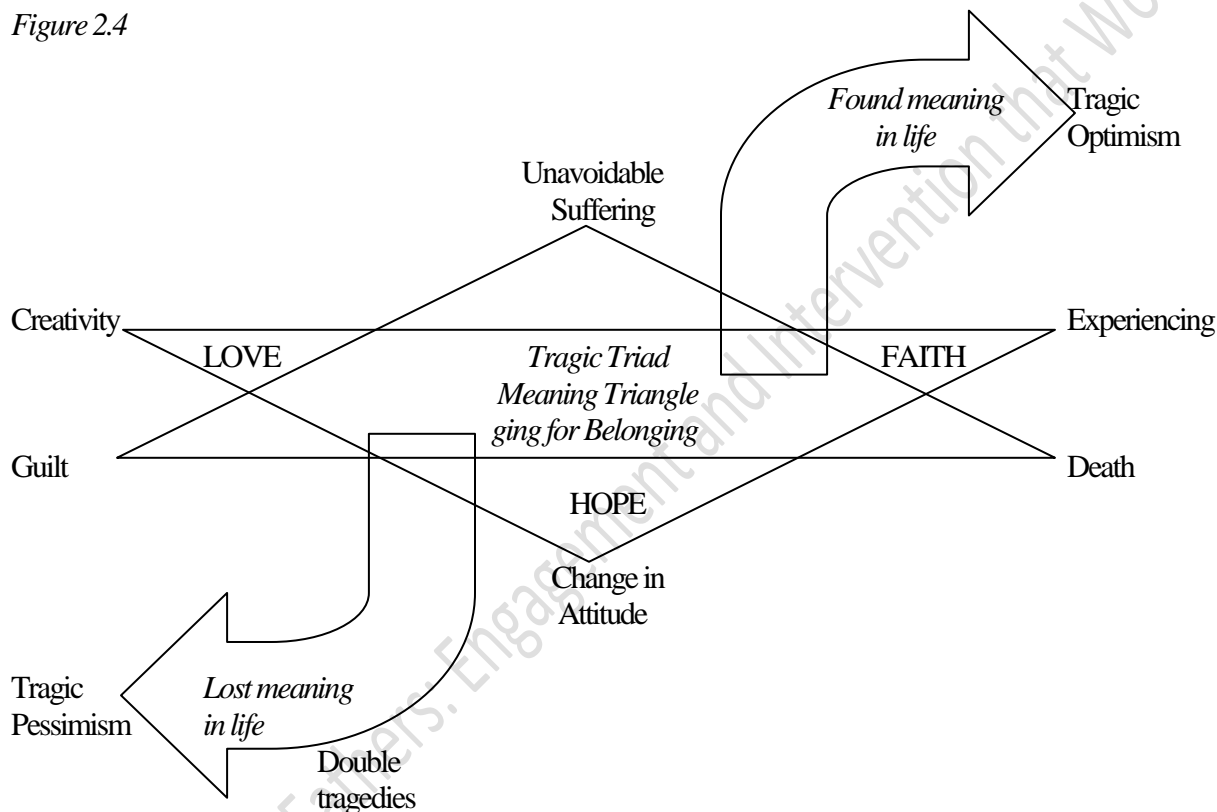


### **Putting together a New Framework of Logogogy: Leading by Meaning in Life**

Together with Mr Norman Kee (first author), we have put together a new understanding of Logotherapy – therapy through meaning. It is more than the therapy itself, but to be led by meaning, i.e., the meaning in life leads us in order for us to find the sense of meaning. We have termed the approach as *Logogogy* where the two Greek words, *logos* means “meaning” and *gogy* means “to lead”, and Logogogy is to lead by meaning in life. Instead of asking what the *meaning of life* is, we have chosen to let life ask what our *meaning in life* is about. It is not to ask what we expect of life but what life expects from us. This change of mindset and mind-attitude (if we would prefer to call it)

help us to see things around us in a very different perspective – a more positive outlook in life. Figure 2.4 is a summary of our framework of Logogogy, i.e., leading by meaning in life,

Figure 2.4



### **Logotherapeutic Tools**

Logotherapy in its simplest form is more than a set of rules, theories and procedures for providing therapy. It is a way of being that is embodied and is experiential in nature. In conducting Logotherapy, it must be noted that meaning cannot be given; it must be discovered. There are three assumptions we need to consider before we can carry out Logotherapy:

1. The person concerned is NOT A VICTIM of circumstances. He/She might manifest symptoms, but he/she is not his/her symptoms.
2. The aim is to assist the person in quest of meaning within his/her Meaning Triangle.

3. The person concerned should be independent of his/her counsellor/therapist during the quest to find guidance within himself/herself.

There are three main tools used in Logotherapy.

- ***Paradoxical Intention***  
This tool is used to encourage ourselves to intend or wish for, even if only for a second, precisely what we fear.
- ***Dereflection***  
This therapeutic strategy aims to divert ourselves away from our problems towards something else meaningful in the world. Like the Orientation to Life in Salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1987), the Orientation towards Meaning (Frankl, 1980) in Logotherapy attempts to enlarge our discernment of meaning, be it in the past, present or future, and to do it creatively, experientially and attitudinally. This is done in the following three ways:
  1. Meaning through creative values, i.e., to broaden one's visual field so that the whole spectrum of meaning in life and values becomes conscious and visible to him/her.
  2. Meaning through experiential values, i.e., to experience one's life in one's encounter with nature such that life can ever again seem wholly meaningless.
  3. Meaning through attitudinal values, i.e., the freedom to find meaning in life through meaningful attitudes even in apparently meaningless situations.
- ***Socratic Dialogue/Modification of Attitudes***  
Certain attitudes and expectations may be barriers to meaning fulfillment and hence, these can alienate us from the meaning potentialities in our lives, accentuating neurotic disorders and/or producing them as a result of repeated bad decisions and formation of poor behavioural patterns. Socratic dialogue used in Logotherapy as a conversational method aims to raise into the conscious mind the possibility of finding and the freedom of fulfilling, meaning in our lives.

### **Examples of Questions to Ask and Reflect About Meaning in Life**

Below are some examples of the kind of themes that either Logotherapy or Logogogy may help us to reflect on and clarify in order to understand the context of the problems and challenges we face as fathers – you will also find a further description of what Logotherapy or Logogogy is about by reflecting on these questions here:

1. Meaning in Life
  - a. What are the anxieties that you face in life?
  - b. What does it mean to you to be alive today?
  - c. What are the possibilities that your life will present you with?
  - d. What do you cherish dearly in life?
2. Attitude in Life
  - a. What are the assumptions that underlying your thoughts?
  - b. What are the attributions that underpinning your actions?
  - c. What is your worldview, i.e., the way you see your life here on earth?

- d. What is your true potential?
3. Relationship in Life
- a. What is your current relationship with your spouse, your children, etc.?
  - b. What about your relationship with your boss, colleagues, etc.?
  - c. What are your responsibilities to your family (wife, children, in-law)?
  - d. What are your responsibilities to your employer, colleagues, etc.?

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