1-Page Book Summary of Man's Search for Meaning

Part I: Frankl's time in concentration camps

Viktor Frankl survived 4 different concentration camps. He observed that the prisoners went through 3 general psychological phases:

- When they were admitted into the camps, most of them suffered from shock.
  - Shock manifested as delusions of reprieve, and abnormal reactions to the circumstances, such as humor, morbid curiosity, and lack of fear.

- Once the prisoners became entrenched in camp life, they fell into a state of apathy.
  - Apathy is the deadening of our emotional responses. This created a protective shell and allowed the prisoners to suffer intensely horrific conditions without losing their minds.

- After the prisoners were liberated, they experienced depersonalization.
During depersonalization, you feel disconnected from your thoughts, your body, and yourself. You view yourself from the outside, or feel as if you're dreaming and not truly present. The conditions of the camps forced the prisoners to detach from themselves, and it was difficult to repair this even after they were free.

Despite the horrifying environment, Frankl noticed that the prisoners who were more likely to survive the concentration camps had specific psychological methods of resistance: rich inner lives, future-oriented goals, and discovery of meaning in their suffering.

Prisoners who were less likely to survive found their suffering meaningless, and eventually succumbed to hopelessness—they weren't convinced they had any reason to try to survive, so they gave up mentally and physically.

We are all subject to external forces that can change our lives, whether they're positive or negative forces. But the one thing we always possess, regardless of external circumstances, is our freedom to choose how we respond to our circumstances. We are in control of our perspective, our choices, and what we make of the situation we find ourselves in.

Part II: Logotherapy

Frankl survived the concentration camps, and what he witnessed in them inspired the invention of logotherapy, a school of psychology which asserts that meaning is the driving force in human life, rather than pleasure, as Sigmund Freud believed, or power, as Alfred Adler believed.

Logotherapy focuses on taking action that aligns with your meaning in life. One method of doing this is the idea of looking back on your deathbed at your choices—would you be happy with them, and would you feel they fulfilled a purpose that was important to you?

Logotherapy suggests 3 different paths to finding your meaning:

- Through achievements and accomplishments, creating works of value or doing deeds.
- Through experiencing positive things like love or the beauty of nature.
- Through suffering, which can be a major human accomplishment if we can find meaning in it.
  - For instance, parents who work hard jobs to give their children a better life have found a meaning in their suffering.

We can do 3 things to find meaning in our suffering.

- Change personal suffering into personal triumphs through changing the view we take of our suffering.
- Use guilt from past decisions to help us change our future decisions for the better.
- Use the fact that we'll die one day to inspire us to act responsibly and make good decisions.

People often get frustrated with existence, and the search for meaning can cause us some anxiety. Logotherapy addresses 2 forms of anxiety:

- Hyper-intention on something you want, which usually prevents you from achieving your desired goal precisely because you're trying to force it to...
Man's Search for Meaning Summary Shortform Introduction

What does it say about us that this book is so popular?

Well, we might be existentially aimless--apparently millions of people are so preoccupied with the question "what is the meaning of life?" that they seek out this book.

This book has existed in many forms. The first part, "Experiences in a Concentration Camp," was first published as a standalone narrative about Viktor Frankl's experiences in 4 different concentration camps during World War II. Other books have covered the horrors, indignities, and abuse that concentration camp prisoners suffered during WWII from an emotional standpoint. But what about the psychology of those prisoners? Frankl set out to write a book that analyzed the mindset of the average concentration camp prisoner and how it reflected, adapted to, and either succumbed to or transcended beyond the torments of the camps. He wanted the book to serve as concrete proof that humans can find meaning under any conditions, even the most horrific.

In the narrative, Frankl briefly touches on some principles from his own school of psychology, logotherapy. After its publication, two things happened: the narrative was a big success, and people wanted to know more about logotherapy after reading it. First, Frankl added a very short section on logotherapy, but people still wrote to him for more information. So this edition, published in 1992, had a much more extended section on the therapeutic doctrine.

However, in his career Frankl wrote twenty full volumes in German on logotherapy. Therefore,...

READ FULL SUMMARY OF MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 1: The Psychological Journey of a Concentration Camp Prisoner

Frankl observed that the psychological journey of a concentration camp prisoner went through 3 basic phases and 3 accompanying symptoms:

- Following their admission into the camp, the primary symptom was shock.
- When they became well entrenched in camp routine, the primary symptom was apathy.
- Following their release and liberation, the primary symptom was depersonalization.

Phase 1: Admission + Shock

Emotional or psychological shock occurs when we encounter situations that are too stressful for us to process immediately. Shock can manifest in a variety of ways, but the main category Frankl discussed is abnormal reactions.

Humans react abnormally to abnormal situations. In other words, when we encounter a stressful situation, we have reactions that often contradict the situation, like laughing at a funeral. Abnormal reactions to abnormal circumstances are actually normal and expected reactions. In fact, the more normal you are, the more abnormal your reactions to abnormal circumstances are.

Frankl refers to four abnormal reactions: delusions of reprieve, humor, curiosity, and lack of fear.

- Delusions of reprieve: We hope for a good outcome in situations, even when there's lots of evidence to the contrary.
  - Example: Frankl was sent to the concentration camps with 1500 other people by train. When their train arrived at Auschwitz, a small group of current prisoners boarded the train. They were all shaved and in typical prison uniform--but looked healthy, ruddy complexioned, well-fed, and seemed to have good attitudes.
    - These prisoners were a “specially chosen elite,” kept in good health deliberately to greet the new prisoners and prey on their tendency toward delusions of reprieve. “Everything’s going to be fine here! We’re happy and well-fed, and you will be too!”
- Humor: There was obviously nothing funny about the concentration camps and their reputations, and yet prisoners could be found making jokes about the situation, like how there was at least real water in the showers at the...
Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 2: Methods of Psychological Resistance

In the last chapter, we reviewed the prisoners’ psychological phases. In this chapter, we’ll discuss 3 main methods of resisting psychologically difficult circumstances: inner lives, future goals, and the freedom to choose.

Inner Lives

Humans are one of the few creatures on earth who have inner lives—personal, private, intangible thoughts and feelings that make us individuals. Our inner lives are a psychological place we can retreat to when external circumstances become overwhelming.

Our inner lives are where we can find happiness, even in terrible external circumstances. Frankl offers a few examples of inner life categories:

- **Humor:** Though humor was one of the abnormal reactions prisoners experienced while in shock, humor could also lift a prisoner’s spirits by allowing them to distance themselves from and rise above the situation, even if only for a few minutes or seconds.
- **Art:** There were instances of art in the concentration camps. Prisoners hosted improvised cabarets from time to time, with music, poetry, and per our last point, comedy.
- **Religion:** Religious and spiritual interest of the prisoners deepened during their time in the concentration camps, and prisoners often had improvised religious services in stolen moments and tucked away places.
- **Beauty:** The beauty of nature intensified for prisoners, and the view of a glowing sunset through the barred windows of a train could remind prisoners of the world outside of the bleak camp.
- **Imagination:** The imagination can serve as an escape. Frankl would picture mundane scenes from his old life in great detail, which gave him mental respite from the camps.
- **Love:** Love is a huge facet of our inner lives. Frankl would often picture his wife in great detail to boost his spirits.

Frankl observed a marked difference in well-being between prisoners with rich inner lives and prisoners without: the prisoners who let go of their inner lives succumbed to their surroundings and had a harder time psychologically and less chance of surviving. In fact, **physically weaker prisoners...**
Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 3: Logotherapy and Meaning

We've covered Frankl's time in the concentration camps and the observations he made about prisoners' psychological phases and methods of resistance. This inspired him to create logotherapy, his own school of psychology.

Logotherapy has a few core principles:

- **Humans are motivated by meaning.** We want to know why we're here, what we're supposed to do, and if it has any value.
  - Social scientists at Johns Hopkins University asked what college students considered very important to them. In America, you might think money reigns--yet only 16% of the students selected “making a lot of money” as the most important thing to them. 78% selected “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.”

- **You should find the true meaning of your life in the world, instead of in your own mind or psyche.**
  - Humans, at their best, are capable of transcending their own wants and feelings to work for things outside themselves--a cause they believe in, or a person they love.
  - From a public opinion poll Frankl conducted in France and Vienna: 89% agreed that humans need a reason to live for, and 61% admitted that in their own lives there was a person or thing/belief that they'd be willing to die for.

- **Make decisions that will benefit your future self.**
  - Live as if you were actually living your second life, and in your first life you had made the choice you're about to make. Would you choose that again?
  - Another way to think of this: “on my deathbed, will I be happy with the choice I'm about to make?”

We saw these principles in the first part. Prisoners who had a future goal had an easier time surviving than those who didn't. These future goals were usually meaningful people or meaningful things outside themselves. It was hard to feel like the things happening in the camps had meaning--but working towards something outside themselves and the camps that had great personal meaning to the prisoners gave them more drive to survive.

Of course, we can toss the word “meaning” around, but it's a heady concept. What is meaning, and more...

**Shortform Exercise: Think On Your Deathbed**

Start thinking about the meaning of your life right now.

You're on your deathbed and looking back on your life. What do you hope to see in your life? Cover all the major areas that are important to you.

**Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 4: Paths to Find Meaning**

The last chapter covered the importance of meaning in our lives. But what are some ways we can start to discover our meaning? Logotherapy gives us 3 different paths.

- By performing a deed or creating something--taking action.
- By coming into contact with someone or experiencing something.
- By experiencing unavoidable suffering, and the attitude we take toward it.
The First Path - Actions

We can discover our life’s purpose through the deeds we perform or the things we create, depending on whether we find them to be meaningful.

(Shortform note: Frankl doesn’t spend much time talking about this path, so we’ll fill in the gaps. The rest of this section comes from our research into logotherapy.)

This path focuses on external situations and external realities. We can do things in the world or create things in the world that help us discover and reinforce our meaning.

For instance, usually the people who are happiest in their jobs are the ones who have connected their actions to a meaning that’s important to them, and they usually perform better in their jobs as well.

Let’s use teaching as an example. The best teachers are often the ones who truly believe that their deeds help shape future generations, and who work to fulfill that purpose. Teachers who find no meaning in educating young people are often not the best teachers, because they lack the drive to do it well, as it serves no purpose.

There are a lot of external rewards bound up in this category that can provide immediate gratification as well as deeper meaning. If you routinely win teaching awards at your school, it’s clear that other people consider your actions meaningful.

But it’s easy to get wrapped up in this external gratification, which you should avoid. You can’t make your purpose to win teaching awards, or what you seek becomes public opinion, not your own purpose. That’ll set you up for failure in terms of meaning—since every person has to decide their own meaning, we can’t let others and their praise decide what’s meaningful to us.

This idea applies to more...

Shortform Exercise: The 3 Paths to Meaning

Logotherapy lays out 3 paths that can help you discover meaning in your life. Instead of treating them as hypothetical paths, let’s examine them as concrete questions about where you find meaning.

List 3 achievements, accomplishments, things you created, or deeds you’ve done in your life that you’re proud of. Write down why you’re proud to have done those things, and why you believe them to be meaningful.

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Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 5: Challenges in Finding Meaning

The last chapter reviewed a few ways to find meaning in your life. But if it sounds easy, it isn't—many people get frustrated in their pursuit of meaning. It is, after all, a lot of responsibility to bear, and the responsibility rests solely on your shoulders.

Just as every individual is unique and has her own unique purpose, every generation has its own unique psychological obsession, and for us right now, it's a form of nihilism, or the belief that life is meaningless.

- This could be because of determinism: we think our outcomes are already decided for us, so what meaning is there to find in something we can't change?
- It could also be because life is transitory—we're going to die anyway, so what meaning can there possibly be?

Let's learn more about nihilism, how we suffer from it, and why.

Nihilism

Again, nihilism is the belief that life is meaningless. The nihilism we suffer from today is a personal, private one that each individual suffers alone. After all, there can be little camaraderie in the idea that everything's meaningless.

Logotherapy calls our specific nihilism existential frustration. People generally get existentially frustrated in 3 different ways:

- They're frustrated with existence in and of itself, specifically the human existence.
  - Frustration with everything it takes to exist as a human from moment to moment, i.e. “why do I have to do all this?”
- They're frustrated with the meaning of existence.
  - Asking why humans exist at all and for what purpose, i.e. “why are we here at all?”
- They're frustrated with the meaning of their personal existence.
  - Someone struggling to find the purpose and meaning of their own life, “i.e. what am I here for?”

Once you fall into one of those frustrations, you can start to feel empty, distant, and aimless, and it gets harder to pull yourself out of this emotional place. Logotherapy refers to this place as an existential vacuum.

- This was a significant phenomenon of the 20th century: a survey at the time of the 1992 edition...

Man's Search for Meaning Summary Chapter 6: Using Logotherapy to Combat Anxiety

Feeling like life is meaningless, thinking our choices have already been determined for us, and worrying about death can all cause feelings of anxiety over the meaning of our lives. Anxiety is a difficult feeling to break out of—by its very nature, anxiety is a feedback loop that keeps us fixated on the very thing that's causing us anxiety. What can we do to face it down and help us break the cycle?

Frankl mentions two specific forms of anxiety, and logotherapy has two corresponding techniques to help you combat these
Hyper-intention anxiety is intense fixation on either yourself or something you want, which usually prevents you from achieving your desired goal precisely because you're trying to force it to happen.

- For instance, when you wake up in the middle of the night and try to force yourself to go back to sleep, very often the hyper-intention to sleep causes you to stay up longer.

Anticipatory anxiety is where you fear something bad happening, and the fear itself causes the very thing to happen.

- For instance, someone who's self-conscious about sweating too much when they're nervous will get nervous, start to sweat, then get anxious about sweating too much, which increases their stress level and causes them to sweat more.

Though these are 2 different types of anxiety, they usually result in the same outcome, and it's rarely a good outcome.

- An example from the book: the more a person tries to orgasm during sex, the less likely they are to actually orgasm— but conversely, the more afraid someone is of not orgasming during sex, the more likely their fear will come true. Same result, but different anxieties.

Logotherapy values taking concrete action over philosophizing, and there are two concrete steps you can take to help break these anxiety cycles: dereflection and paradoxical intention.

- Dereflection helps you focus on something bigger than or outside of yourself, which inadvertently helps you achieve your goals. This is one way to respond to hyper-intention.
  - The book gives an...

**Shortform Exercise: Combating Anxiety**

Try to break out of hyper-intention or anticipatory anxiety.

What's something in your life that's causing you anxiety? Describe how that anxiety feels--is it hyper-intention (focusing on yourself or something you want to do) or anticipatory anxiety (worrying that something bad will happen in the future)?

**Shortform Exercise: Integrate Your Takeaways**

Now that you've finished the summary of *Man's Search for Meaning*, reflect on what you've learned.

What sticks with you the most from the book? What's your biggest takeaway?