



# Viktor Frankl and Emily Esfahani-Smith: Finding Meaning

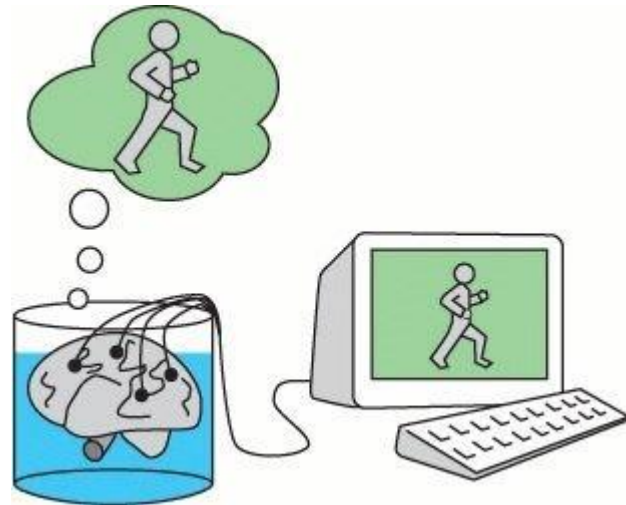
GNED 101 Week 13

# GNED 101 Course Units

1. How do we know what is real?
2. What makes us who we are?
3. What forces shape our world?
4. **What makes us happy?**

# The Experience Machine

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?”



# Why Are You Here?



# Happiness!



- ▶ What does it mean to lead a *good life*?
- ▶ Is living a good life about something more than being happy (in the sense of contentment, pleasure, joy)?
- ▶ Are all pleasures created equal, when it comes to their contribution to a good life?
  - ▶ What else might be important to living well?



# Think About Death to Live a Better Life

- ▶ In one study, those who dealt with a traumatic life event (a crisis that could cause death in themselves or a loved one) demonstrated a shift towards the pursuit of intrinsic values (Lykins et al 2007)
  - ▶ **Intrinsic values (in psychology):** related to inherently rewarding goals such as warm relationships, community contribution, personal growth, connection with nature
  - ▶ **Extrinsic values:** related to external rewards like wealth and social status
- ▶ In another study, those who pursued intrinsic values showed more acceptance of death and less fear of death (Van Hiel and Vansteenkiste 2009)

APRIL 1, 2015 | 12 MIN READ

## Thinking about Death Can Make Life Better

Contemplating our mortality can ease our angst and make our lives more meaningful

BY MICHAEL W. WIEDERMAN

# Frankl's Story

- ▶ Viktor Frankl: Austrian psychiatrist
- ▶ A survivor of the Holocaust
- ▶ Frankl's model of psychotherapy: logotherapy
- ▶ 1938: Nazis take over Austria and Frankl is forbidden to treat "Aryan" patients by the Nazis because of his Jewish ethnicity
- ▶ Saved several patients from the Nazis' euthanasia program
- ▶ 1941: Married his wife, Tilly Grosser





# Frankl's Story

- ▶ September 1942: Frankl, along with his wife and parents, are sent to a Jewish ghetto
- ▶ Frankl is given the job of therapist to the other prisoners
- ▶ October 1944: Frankl and his wife are moved to Auschwitz
- ▶ Shortly after, Frankl is moved to another concentration camp near Dachau

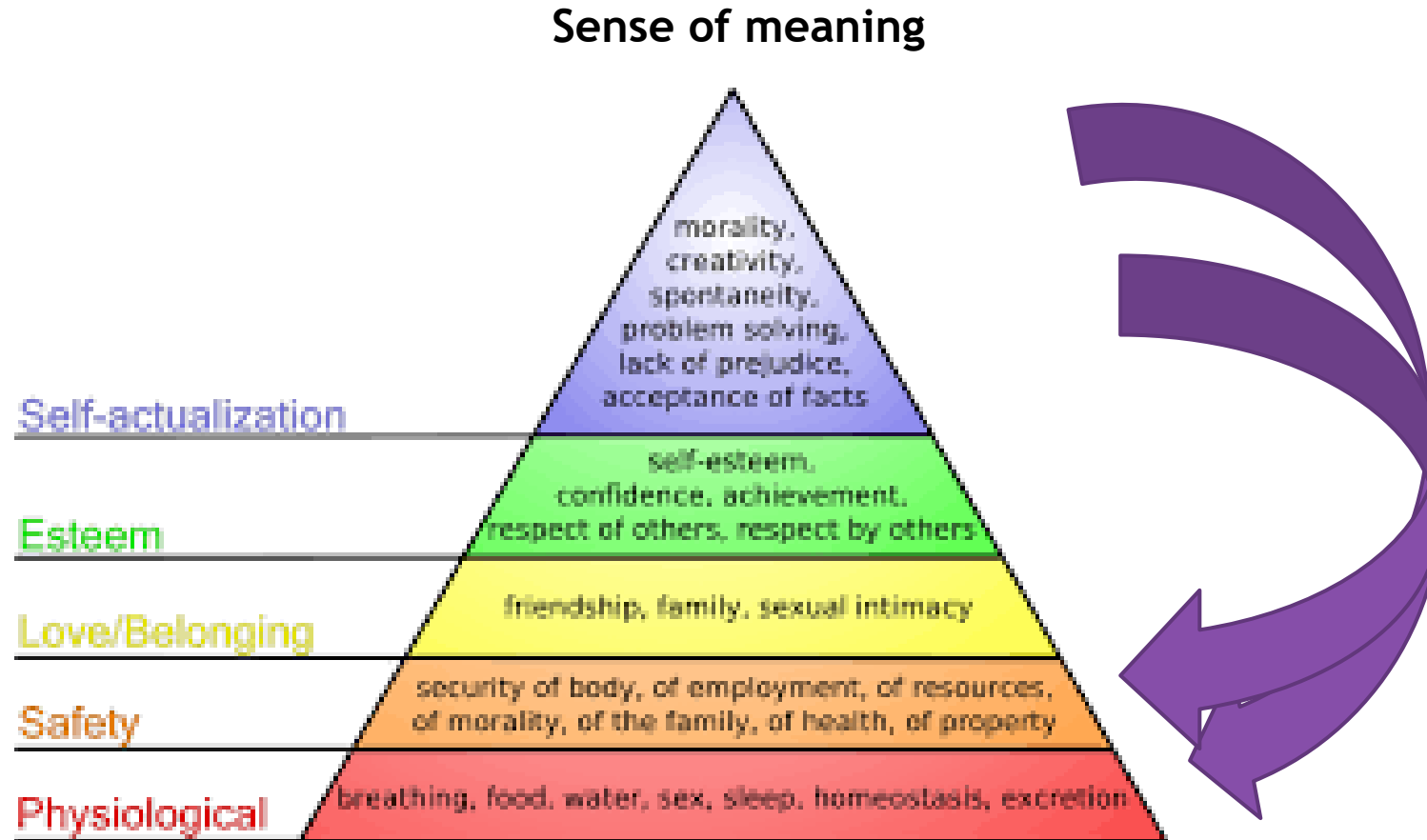


# Frankl's Observations

- ▶ Prisoners who lost the will to live were more likely to die
- ▶ Those who didn't have a sense of purpose lost the will to live
- ▶ “The prisoner who had lost faith in the future - his future - was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay”
- ▶ Nietzsche: “he who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*”



# Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs





# What Gives Life Meaning?

# What Gives Life Meaning?

- ▶ Love
- ▶ “A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth--that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.”



MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

*The* NEEDS  
of STRANGERS

"Ignatieff has  
invoked the understanding,  
the wisdom, and the eloquence

of some of the seminal thinkers in Western tradition to help revive a sense of what we are or should  
be talking about when we talk about the needs of strangers." —MERLE RUBIN, *Christian Science Monitor*



Picador

“I need to be loved to be at peace with myself and to be able to love in turn...If we need love, it is for reasons which go beyond the happiness it brings; it is for the connection, the rootedness, it gives us with others”

## To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life

Nathaniel M. Lambert<sup>1</sup>, Tyler F. Stillman<sup>2</sup>, Joshua A. Hicks<sup>3</sup>,  
Shanmukh Kamble<sup>4</sup>, Roy F. Baumeister<sup>5</sup>, and Frank D. Fincham<sup>5</sup>

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# Helping Others

“On my fourth day in the sick quarters I had just been detailed to the night shift when the chief doctor rushed in and asked me to volunteer for medical duties in another camp containing typhus patients. Against the urgent advice of my friends (and despite the fact that almost none of my colleagues offered their services) I decided to volunteer. I knew that in a working party I would die in a short time. But if I had to die there might at least be some sense in my death. I thought that it would doubtless be more to the purpose to try and help my comrades as a doctor than to vegetate or finally lose my life as the unproductive laborer that I was then.”

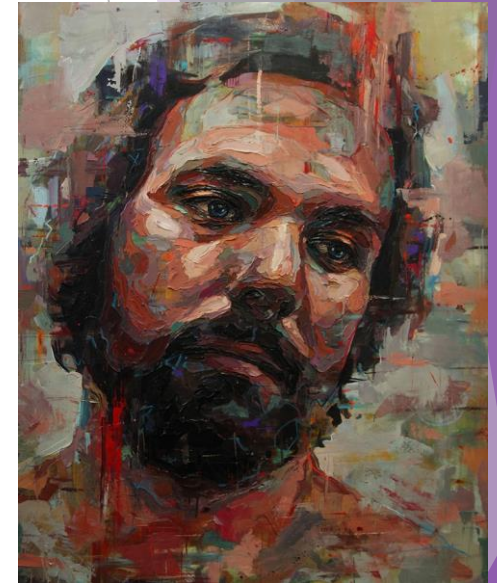






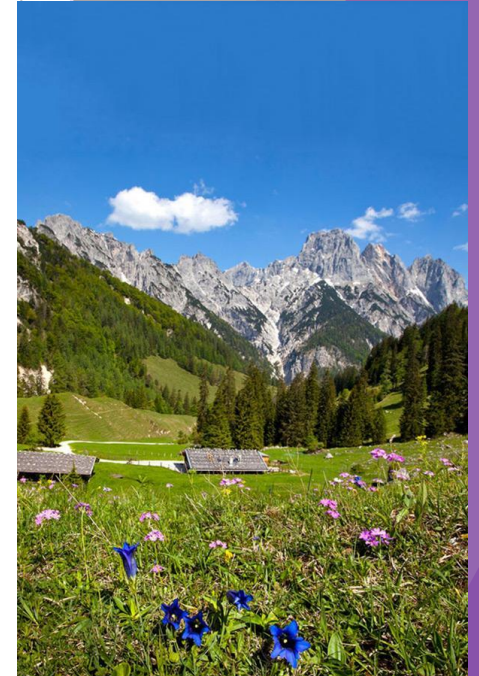
# Our Response to Suffering

- ▶ In our response to suffering, our life can have dignity and meaning
  - ▶ “[N]ot only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete...The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails...gives him ample opportunity - even under the most difficult circumstances - to add a deeper meaning to his life”
  - ▶ “[H]uman life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and...this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death”
- ▶ Esfahani Smith: telling a redemptive story about the suffering you’ve experienced can give meaning to your life



# Appreciating Beauty

“As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that factor—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature’s beauty, which we had missed for so long. In camp, too, a man might draw the attention of a comrade working next to him to a nice view of the setting sun shining through the tall trees of the Bavarian woods... One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colours, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate gray mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, ‘How beautiful the world could be!’”



# Beauty and Meaning

- ▶ Those who coped with the stress of the pandemic by focusing on their appreciation for life's beauty also reported experiencing life as highly meaningful
- ▶ Appreciating beauty in life correlated to finding one's own existence valuable
- ▶ Taking the time to reflect on experiences a person appreciate made life feel more meaningful to them

Article | Published: 10 February 2022

## **Experiential appreciation as a pathway to meaning in life**

[Jinhyung Kim](#), [Patricia Holte](#), [Frank Martela](#), [Colin Shanahan](#), [Zhanhong Li](#), [Hong Zhang](#), [Nikolett Eisenbeck](#), [David F. Carreno](#), [Rebecca J. Schlegel](#) & [Joshua A. Hicks](#) 

[Nature Human Behaviour](#) **6**, 677–690 (2022) | [Cite this article](#)

I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in Nature. I exalted in the mere fact of existence, of being part of it all . . . I knew so well the satisfaction of losing self in a perception of supreme power and love . . .

- Quoted in William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*

. . . I could no longer clearly discern the physical boundaries of where I began and where I ended. I sensed the composition of my being as that of a fluid rather than that of a solid. I no longer perceived myself as a whole object separate from everything.

- Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*

I lost the boundary to my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos.  
- Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*

# Transcendence

- ▶ Esfahani Smith:  
"Transcendent states are those rare moments when you're lifted above the hustle and bustle of daily life, your sense of self fades away, and you feel connected to a higher reality."
- ▶ Some types of transcendent experiences: mindfulness, flow, love, awe
- ▶ Feelings of awe are associated with more generous, less self-centred behaviour





Live in fragments no  
longer. Only connect...

E. M. Forster

# Only Connect!

- ▶ **Coherence:** connect the dots in your life so that different events and experiences fit together
- ▶ **Purpose:** connect your present actions to valuable goals in the future
- ▶ **Existential mattering:** feeling that your life connects and contributes to a larger reality
- ▶ **Beauty, transcendence:** feeling a sense of harmony, attunement, and engagement with what you are experiencing
- ▶ ...and, **connect with others!**



“Meaning connects things”  
- Roy Baumeister

# Frankl:

"Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself -- be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself -- by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love -- the more human he is."

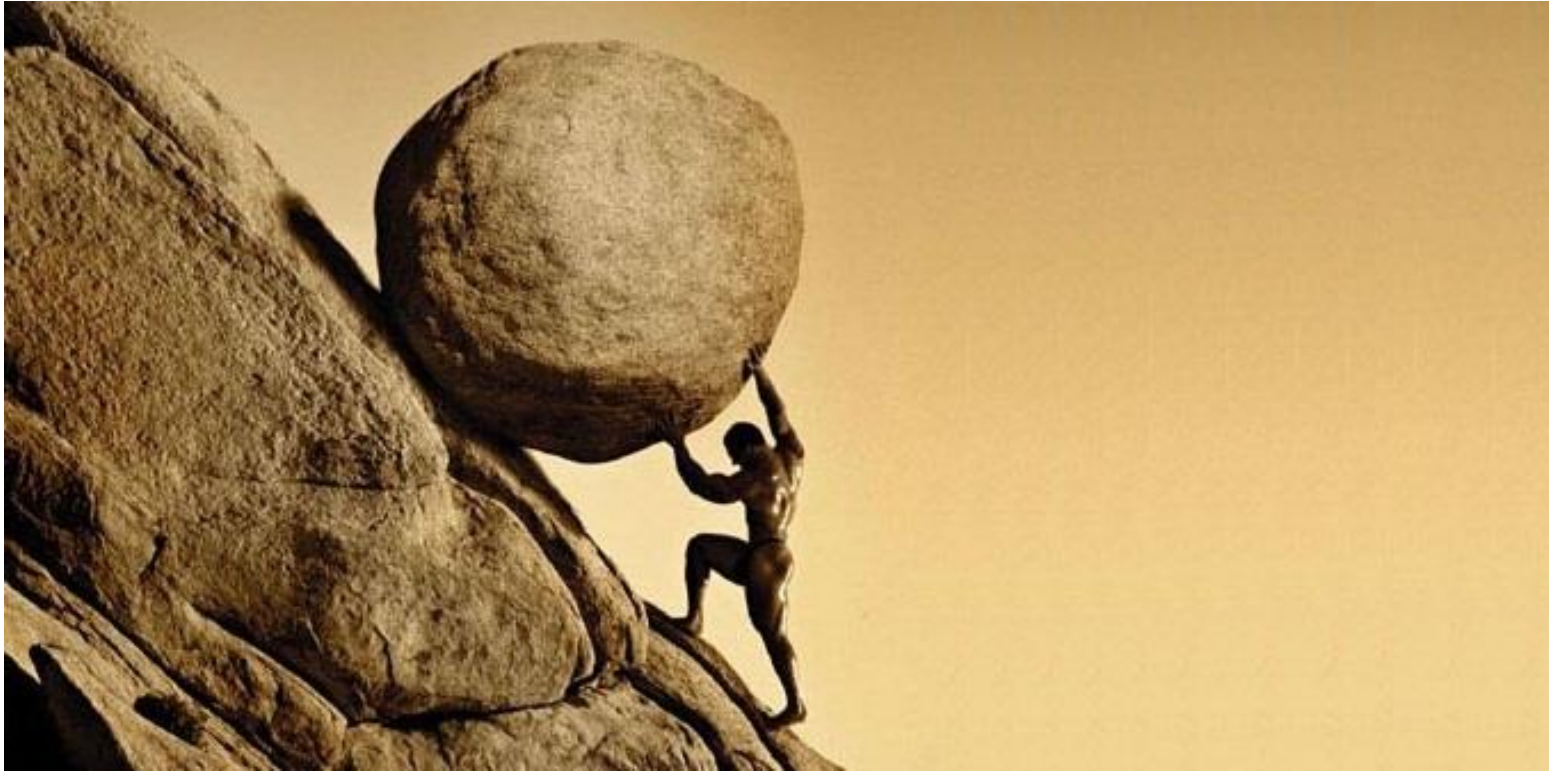






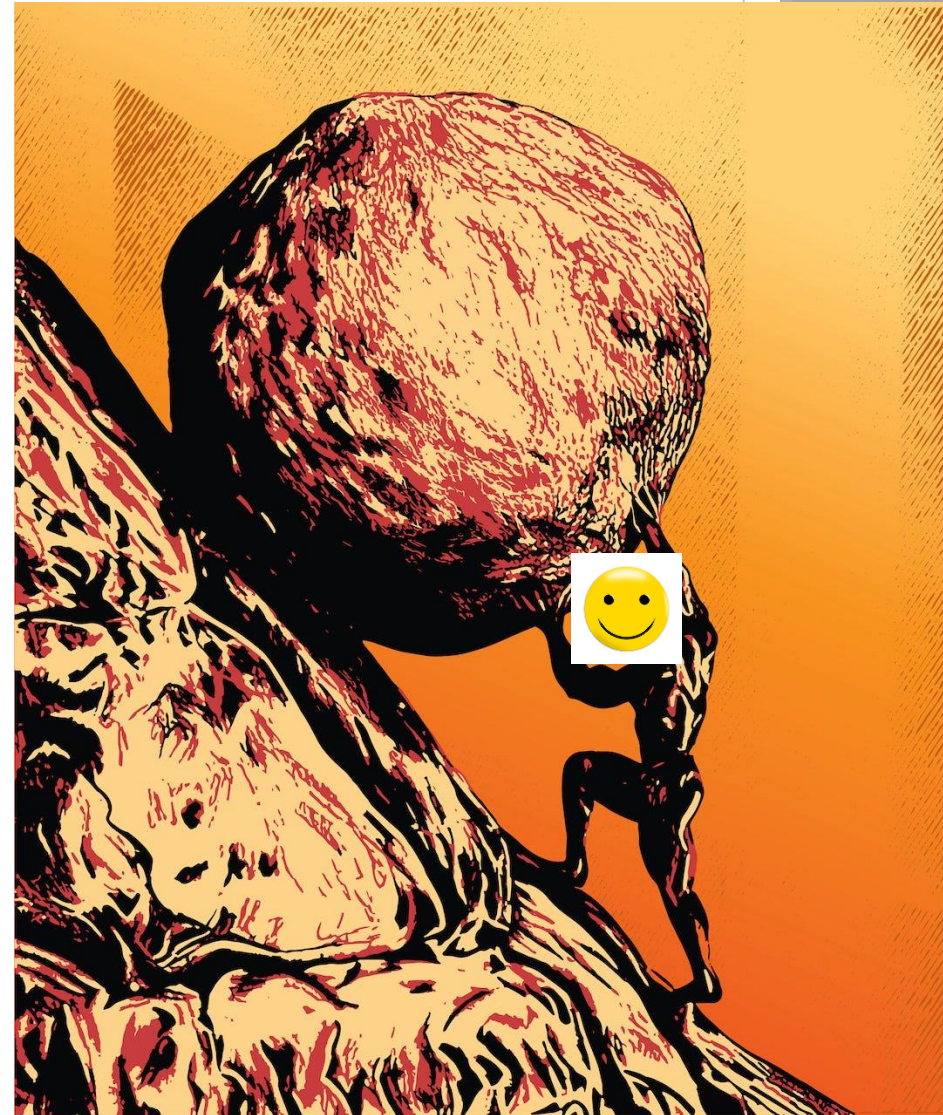
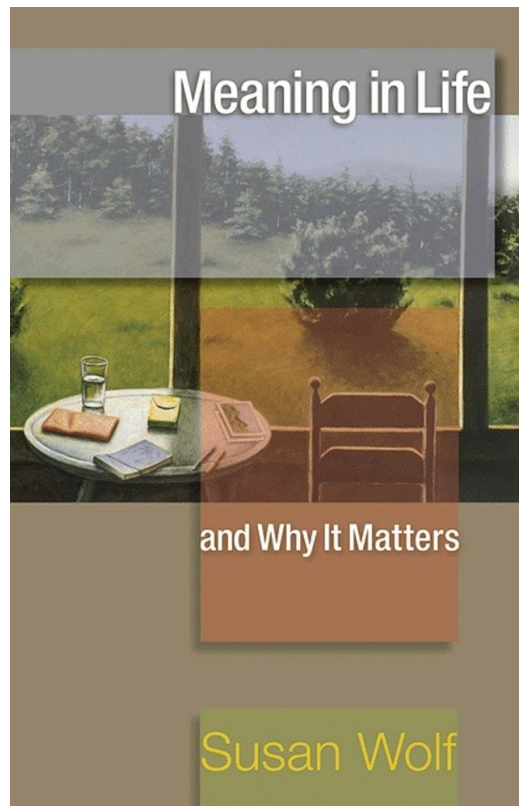
Can Anything Be Meaningful?

# The Myth of Sisyphus



# A Happy Sisyphus?

Susan Wolf: you can feel fulfilled and contented while doing an activity that isn't worthwhile



# Susan Wolf on Meaning and a Good Life

- ▶ Meaning in life consists of:
  - ▶ Loving some people or things (rather than feeling bored or alienated)
  - ▶ Loving something that is worthy of being loved
- ▶ To have a meaningful life, you have to engage positively with things that are objectively meaningful



# Frankl:

- ▶ *Loving something...* Finding meaning involves “intensification of the inner life”: cultivating a spiritual life (broadly speaking)
  - ▶ To survive, prisoners needed to escape the “spiritual poverty” of the camps
- ▶ *That is worthy of love?...* “What [a person] needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled.”



# Pleasure?

- ▶ Pleasure itself can't be a source of meaning
  - ▶ “Happiness is not pursued, it ensues”
  - ▶ “The pursuit of happiness is a *contradiction in terms*”
- ▶ Focus on meaning, and pleasure and contentment will follow

[Emotion](#). 2011 Aug;11(4):807-15. doi: 10.1037/a0022010.

## Can seeking happiness make people unhappy? [corrected] Paradoxical effects of valuing happiness.

[Mauss IB](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Tamir M](#), [Anderson CL](#), [Savino NS](#).

[+](#) Author information

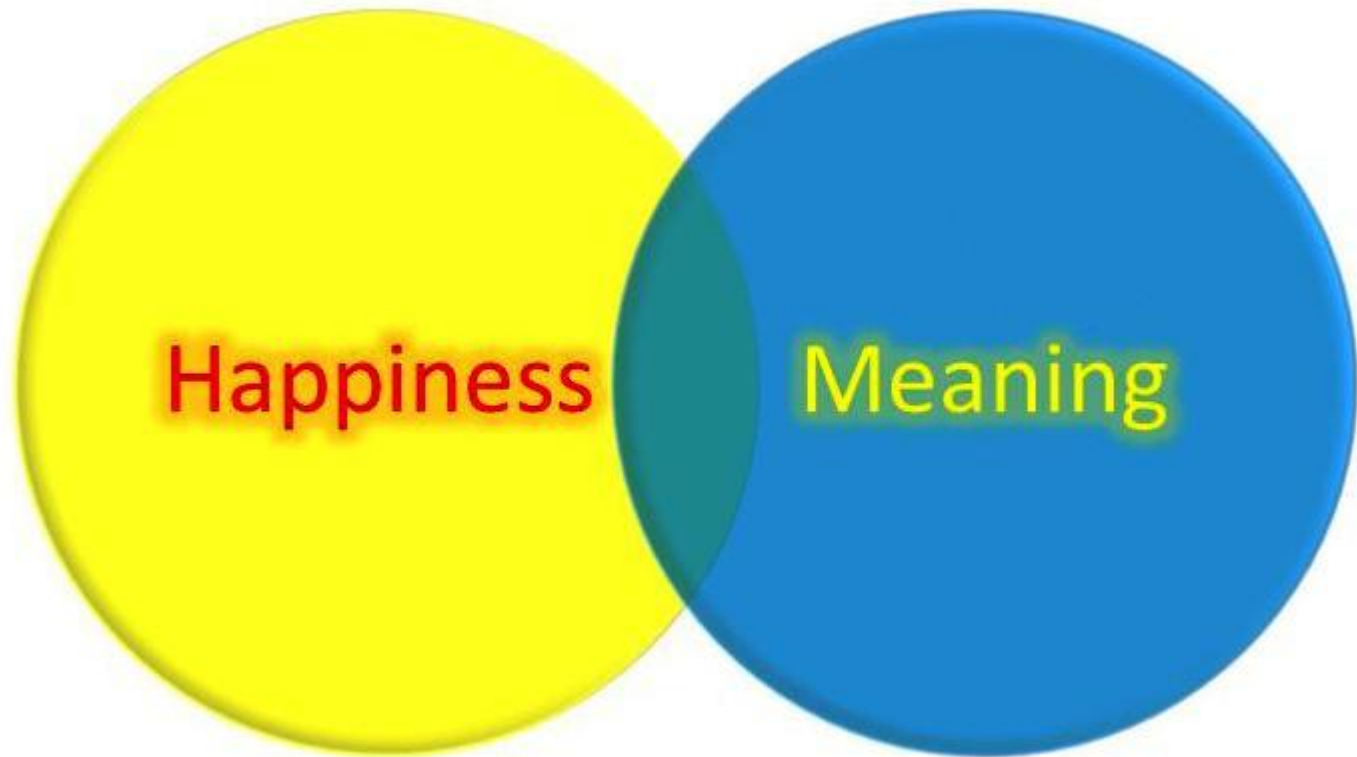
### Erratum in

*Emotion*. 2011 Aug;11(4):767.

### Abstract

Happiness is a key ingredient of well-being. It is thus reasonable to expect that valuing happiness will have beneficial outcomes. We argue that this may not always be the case. Instead, valuing happiness could be self-defeating, because the more people value happiness, the more likely they will feel disappointed. This should apply particularly in positive situations, in which people have every reason to be happy. Two studies support this hypothesis. In Study 1, female participants who valued happiness more (vs. less) reported lower happiness when under conditions of low, but not high, life stress. In Study 2, compared to a control group, female participants who were experimentally induced to value happiness reacted less positively to a happy, but not a sad, emotion induction. This effect was mediated by participants' disappointment at their own feelings. Paradoxically, therefore, valuing happiness may lead people to be less happy just when happiness is within reach.

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Meaning *or* Happiness?

## HEALTH

# There's More to Life Than Being Happy

Meaning comes from the pursuit of more complex things than happiness

EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH JANUARY 9, 2013


*"It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness."*

In September 1942, Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist in Vienna, was arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp with his wife and parents. Three years later, when his camp was liberated, most of his family, including his pregnant wife, had perished -- but he, prisoner number 119104, had lived. In his bestselling 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he wrote in nine days about his

Having meaning increases well-being and life satisfaction, improves physical and mental health, and enhances resiliency and self-esteem







Articles

## Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life

Roy F. Baumeister , Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer L. Aaker & Emily N. Garbinsky

Pages 505-516 | Received 03 Jun 2012, Accepted 24 Jul 2013, Published online: 20 Aug 2013

 Download citation  <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.830764>

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## HAPPINESS

- ▶ Feeling good
- ▶ Focusing on how you are feeling in the present
- ▶ Having your needs met (benefits you get)
- ▶ Avoiding difficult life complications



## MEANING

- ▶ Having a sense of purpose
- ▶ Involvement with things outside oneself
- ▶ Doing things that express and reflect your authentic self
- ▶ Integrating the past, present, and future
- ▶ Doing things for others/contributing (benefits you give)
- ▶ Comes with more stress and anxiety

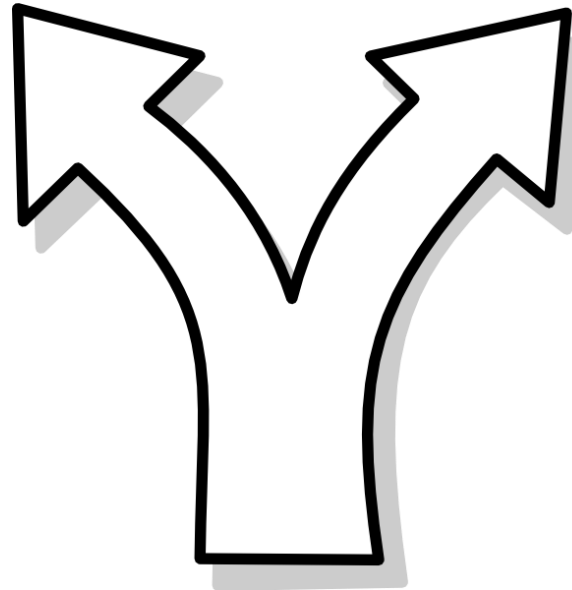
# Either/Or?

Pursue happiness

Feeling good,  
meeting your  
needs, focusing on  
the self

Pursue meaning

Having purpose, focusing  
on contributing to  
others, more stress &  
anxiety



# Or Maybe...

## Pursue happiness + meaning?

- ▶ Overlap: social connections, feeling productive, not being bored
- ▶ Some meaningful experiences involve positive emotions
- ▶ Meaning can add to overall life satisfaction, another dimension of happiness
- ▶ Perhaps meaning is necessary, but is it enough?
- ▶ Can we find some balance between the two?



# Can We Build Meaning on Our Own?

- ▶ Esfahani Smith: we need to build “cultures of meaning”
- ▶ Because we are all different, with different perspectives on the world, we can bring into existence new things that couldn't be predicted in advance
- ▶ Natality: “beginning... is the supreme capacity of man”



“The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born to in order to die but in order to begin. [This is]...the miracle that saves the world” - Arendt

