

Other than refugees, it is difficult for us to realize what existence was like for an inmate in a Nazi death camp. We can only wonder how people get through every day, and how, when overwhelmed by massacres, they continue to remain sane.

Viktor Frankl, himself a victim of the camps, helps illustrate how the Nazi regime's inmates suffered. These encounters have presented Frankl with justification for his therapeutic theory, logotherapy, which describes how we need to explore our real sense of life to flourish and succeed in more desperate situations.

This review summarizes both Frankl's observations from the camps and his logotherapy growth.

Chapter 1 - The initial reaction of inmates to the death camps was a shock, first in the form of optimism and then desperation.

Everybody now has at least a certain understanding of the horrific, cruel actions that took place under the Nazi regime in the death camps across Germany and Eastern Europe.

Similarly, before the Holocaust, the survivors of Nazi aggression had at least a clue of the horrible fate that awaited them. Because of this, you'd imagine that terror would have been the original response upon joining the camps. However, responses were separated into three various stages.

On entry at the camp, or also while inmates were being transferred, the first process began.

The inmates were so surprised by what was going on that they were actively trying to reassure themselves that, eventually, everything was going to be okay. Some of the inmates had read horror tales about what had occurred in the camps, so when they were sent there, they convinced themselves that things were going to be better for them.

For instance, those who came to the Auschwitz concentration camp were sent to the left or right when they got off the train, one group for hard work, and one for immediate execution. None of them understood what these classes implied, though.

The inmates submitted to the illusion of relief due to the fear of being at the camp, wrongly thinking that the line they were in would somehow mean an exit from imminent doom.

The inmates who had not yet been used to the brutality of the camp were terrified by all that went on during this first period. The deeply emotional experience of witnessing other offenders being disciplined for the most minor crimes in the harshest manner could not be handled by recently arriving inmates.

They quickly lost all faith when faced by gruesome cruelty and started to see death as a sort of salvation. In reality, most treated death as a way out, for instance by catching the barbed wire fence across the camp.

Chapter 2 - The inmates fell into a state of apathy after several days in the camp, which encouraged them to focus on survival.

Inmates quickly got "used to" the terror and death that engulfed them after their first trauma, thereby becoming emotionally numb.

Rather, they concentrated all their thoughts and feelings on life. For instance, instead of talk about emotions such as love or lust, inmates often discussed and even fantasized about food or some other kind of essential, life-sustaining satisfactions that we generally use every day, but that was highly restricted in the camps.

In the initial phase, though inmates fled from the terror, the sterile feelings of the second period served as a barrier, giving them the mentality to both functions with the camps' constant cruelties and capture every hope of enhancing their own hope of survival.

For starters, after many people died in one of the camps after a typhus epidemic, inmates in the second stage no longer felt disgusted or pitied when they looked at the bodies. Rather, they saw a chance to snatch an already-deceased inmate's discarded food, shoes, or other apparel pieces.

There was no near term end to their stay in the camp other than at the mercy of the soldiers, leaving prisoners incapable of believing that there was even any point in living.

We typically live for the coming years: we make huge plans and get enthusiastic about the unfolding of our lives. However, inmates in the camps had a totally different opinion. There was no optimism for the long term for them. Nobody knew when (or if) their jail sentence would end at some point. There was not even a future.

The bulk of inmates felt that their days were almost over. In the camp, they simply "existed" - they gave up" life "and there were no aims to be accomplished.

Chapter 3 - Life was usually classified initially by a sense of disbelief and then by resentment following freedom from the camps.

Upon their liberation, the inmates who were fortunate enough to escape the death camps had to face a tough new obstacle. The majority had spent such a long period of time in the camps that it became very hard to live a regular life.

The inmates were unable to comprehend their independence directly upon their execution. Habituated to a state of mental apathy, they were not able to shift their outlook completely. Inmates couldn't feel happiness or enjoyment at all.

Having so always fantasized about freedom, when it arrived, they considered it unbelievable.

Since being freed, many inmates felt as if it was their time to cause pain on someone else after all the violence that had been forced on them. It made perfect sense for them to search for any form of reward after having been made to endure such cruelty, for example, by taking revenge against the officers in the camps.

Moreover, when they came back home, released inmates did not often experience the warm welcome they hoped they would. Sadly, several inmates returned home only to discover that their families had been destroyed and that their cities had transformed into ruins.

But the resentment wasn't only about loss, families, and friends. They prayed for sympathy, hoping that they would understand their pain. Far too much, though, the individuals they spoke to after liberation, those who had never experienced a death camp, would just sigh and claim that, for instance, they too had suffered from scarcity and bombardment.

It was not easy for the released inmates to adjust to everyday life, but after a while, most of them learned to enjoy their lives again and be grateful that they had lived through the Holocaust.

Chapter 4 - To detach themselves from what was going on in the real world, inmates reflected on their "inner" life.

We have heard, so far, how inmates struggled inside the center. But how could it have secured their sanity and survived the horrors? In reality, it all came down to where their attention was focused.

For others, it was easy to physically avoid the fear and cruelty of their surroundings by recalling their beloved ones and contemplating the past. In reality, those who were lucky to retrieve in their recollections at least a little satisfaction were much more able to thrive than others.

In the harsh existence of the camps, they had little escape and, with nothing more than dirt covering their hands, they were forced to do hard labor in the cold. Nevertheless, love could give them satisfaction. And if only in their imagination, a fun chat with their loved ones was something that the camp officers could not detract from them.

And the slightest bits of memories, ordinary stuff like flipping on the lamps back at home in their own rooms, were enough to provide comfort.

By getting involved in nature and entertainment, several inmates find comfort. A picturesque sunset or a sweet pigeon, even though it was only flickering, might give the prisoners a slice of joy.

Throughout their half-hour lunch break, inmates organized small events in which they sought to remove themselves from their life by, for instance, music or other minor activities.

Even occasional times have arisen where inmates have discovered a sense of humor.

This fun also contained predicting the future, after being discharged, and laughing about how their camp habits could impact later scenarios. For starters, they may forget where they were seated at the family dinner table and ask for food from the bottom of the cup, where the only healthy beans might be contained in the cooking pots at the camp.

Chapter 5 - The majority of inmates acknowledged their destiny, but others attempted to make choices while they could.

The right to choose is something we all take for granted, whether it's figuring out our clothes, our meals, or the organizations we help. Of course, little can be taken for granted in the camps. An entirely different definition took on the right to judge for yourself.

Many options were a life or death issue, and many inmates were terrified of making them.

Often, for instance, inmates are told to go to another camp. The inmates were left in the dark, though, about the real destination and the purpose of the transfer. These were often referred to by the officers as "rest camps," but nobody could be sure they were not being taken to the death camps.

But, if inmates knew they were going to be transferred elsewhere, others would be desperate to make the option. This was often likely if they worked harder for their kidnappers, for example, by volunteering for overtime hours.

And there was also the hope that they would eventually get a release from their new location. They had no way of understanding what the right option would be, and thus many inmates agreed that they could not interfere in their life.

However, there were other inmates who were eager to preserve even the slightest liberties, and so seized any chance to make choices.

These inmates, despite their wretched situation, sought, as far as feasible, to live in harmony with their own beliefs.

For one, their personal faith was something that could not be taken away from them. While their routines would have to be discarded, they might still continue to live up to high moral expectations.

For starters, even if they were starving themselves, some inmates would offer food to others who need them more than they do.

Chapter 6 - Our drive to act, according to logotherapy, comes from the essence of our life.

Many horrible situations in the camps were seen by the writer. He learned repeatedly during that period that individuals need a purpose in their lives to have something to look forward to.

The inmates who were able to retain this sense were, therefore, greater and more durable than those who lacked it.

This discovery helped to validate many concepts from his own psychotherapy philosophy, logotherapy, which claims that the main purpose in our lives is our quest for purpose.

There is tons of literature promoting this definition. In research at Johns Hopkins University, for instance, students were asked what they found to be fundamental to their lives. The overwhelming majority, 78 percent, indicated that it was most essential to them to find a goal and purpose in life.

We are confronted with what is known as a moral void because we are unable to find purpose in our lives. In themselves, individuals who are unable to live according to their beliefs, or feel that their lives have no purpose, will feel a form of the void.

To encounter the emotional void, you do not have to suffer significant trauma. For instance, just take the common "Sunday neurosis," which happens when people tend to relax after a scheduled week of working hard, only to find that their lives are entire without meaning. Logotherapy seeks to help individuals find sense and thereby escape the detrimental effects of a prolonged psychological vacuum that might result.

Chapter 7 - There is no universal sense of life; at a given time, everybody's life has its own unique meaning.

Realizing how important it is to have a target in life, we are left questioning how we are going to pursue our own. Admittedly, many people feel that they must first find their life's meaning to make the best decisions in life.

Logotherapy, however, implies that the reverse is true: it's how we behave, and our purpose is dictated by the burden we have towards our decisions.

The inmates in the death camps who were able to sustain meaning in life, for instance, did so based on the decisions they made. They were offered a reason by the choice to search for beauty in nature or support those in greater need, a recognition that they were not defeated and must keep moving.

The implication of this is that our interpretations don't have to be the same. In reality, everybody has their own sense of life.

If you question a chess grandmaster for the right move, she'll tell you that, in total, there's no better move. Depending on the various conditions throughout the game, there is, however, the best pass.

The same refers to the purpose of life: there is no common concept of life, and the purpose of life depends on the particular collection of conditions and choices of each person.

Logotherapy tries to make people accept the fact that their lives can have a purpose and that, due to their own preferences, each wants to work out the meaning of their lives.

It has no limitations on the nature of life. For instance, you could think that your new career at a sustainability start-up gives you personal value (e.g., feeling like you're involved in a meaningful change to the world) or it may go beyond the personal and include community and social consciousness (e.g. seeing changes in the lives of others).

Chapter 8 - The worries can be handled by deliberately following them.

While logotherapy's primary aim is to help individuals locate the purpose of life, that isn't its only use. Logotherapy has since established a range of beneficial strategies, e.g., when feeling an existential vacuum, for individuals who have developed psychiatric illnesses.

By concentrating on the inner rather than outer causes that affect patients, Logotherapy can do this.

The individual is examined and his neurotic concerns are clarified by his life and other social incidents and situations in regular psychotherapy. Logotherapy, on the other hand, believes that individuals can make choices and determine the meaning of their lives regardless of their surroundings.

To produce long-term success, this simple insight is important to make people know that they are really in charge of their worries and anxieties. Just how?

This unusual pattern is used by logotherapy: when we worry that something will occur, it always does, but when we try to push things to happen, it never does!

Assume if you have an anxious friend who, in front of other individuals, is mortally terrified of blushing. Since he's still worried about it, if he's in a group, he instantly starts blushing.

Logotherapy utilizes something named paradoxical desire in this case, in which the person is asked to do specifically the thing she is scared of.

For instance, your anxious friend may start attempting to blush as much as possible while he's around other individuals. He will quickly realize that nothing happens when he attempts to push it, and he will therefore overcome his anxiety of blushing.

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl Book Review

Our growth, and even our very life, depends on our capacity to find the sense of our lives. This does not have to be anything big or spiritual; depending on the particular conditions, the own personal sense would do just great.

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