<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-seek/201205/mans-search-meaning>

[**Neel Burton M.D.**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/neel-burton-md)[Hide and Seek](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-seek)

## Man’s Search for Meaning

Meaning as a cure for depression and other ills.

Posted May 24, 2012

Updated 24 October 2015.

Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for. —Victor Frankl

In Man’s Search for Meaning, psychiatrist and neurologist Victor Frankl (1905-1997) wrote about his ordeal as a [concentration](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/attention) camp inmate during the Second World War. Interestingly, he found that those who survived longest in concentration camps were not those who were physically strong, but those who retained a sense of control over their [environment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment).

He observed:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s own attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose one’s own way.

Frankl’s message is ultimately one of hope: even in the most absurd, painful, and dispiriting of circumstances, life can be given a meaning, and so too can suffering. Life in the concentration camp taught Frankl that our main drive or [motivation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/motivation) in life is neither pleasure, as [Freud](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/freudian-psychology) had believed, nor power, as Adler had believed, but meaning.

After his release, Frankl founded the school of logotherapy (from the Greek logos, meaning ‘reason’ or ‘principle’), which is sometimes referred to as the ‘Third Viennese School of [Psychotherapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/therapy)’ for coming after those of Freud and Adler. The aim of logotherapy is to carry out an existential analysis of the person, and, in so doing, to help him uncover or discover meaning for his life.

According to Frankl, meaning can be found through:

- Experiencing reality by interacting authentically with the environment and with others,

- Giving something back to the world through [creativity](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/creativity) and self-expression, and

- Changing our attitude when faced with a situation or circumstance that we cannot change.

Frankl is credited with coining the term ‘Sunday neurosis’ to refer to the dejection that many people feel at the end of the working week when at last they have the time to realize just how empty and meaningless their life has become. This existential vacuum may open the door on all sorts of excesses and compensations such as [neurotic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroticism)anxiety, avoidance, [binge eating](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/eating-disorders), drinking, overworking, and overspending. In the short-term, these excesses and compensations carpet over the existential vacuum, but in the longer term they prevent action from being taken and meaning from being found.

For Frankl, [depression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression) results when the gap between what a person is and what he ought to be, or once wished to be, becomes so large that it can no longer be carpeted over. The person’s goals seem far out of reach and he can no longer envisage a future. As in Psalm 41, abyssus abyssum invocat—‘hell brings forth hell’, or, in an alternative translation, ‘the deep calls unto the deep.’

Thus depression is our way of telling ourselves that something is seriously wrong and needs working through and changing. Unless change can be made, there will continue to be a mismatch between our lived experience and our desired experience, between the meaninglessness of everyday life and the innate drive to find meaning, to self-actualize, to be all that we can be. From an existential standpoint, the experience of depression obliges us to become aware of our mortality and freedom, and challenges us to exercise the latter within the framework of the former. By meeting this ultimate challenge, we can break out of the cast that has been imposed upon us, discover who we truly are, and, in so doing, begin to give deep meaning to our life.

Neel Burton is author of [The Meaning of Madness](http://www.amazon.com/Meaning-Madness-second-Neel-Burton-ebook/dp/B012OIFQQ8/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8), [*The Art of Failure: The Anti Self-Help Guide*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Art-Failure-Self-Help-ebook/dp/B004LROQO4/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1335710467&sr=8-1), [*Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception*](http://www.amazon.com/Hide-Seek-Psychology-Self-Deception-ebook/dp/B0079QQJIK/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1335802884&sr=8-3), [*Heaven and Hell: The Psychology of the Emotions*](http://www.amazon.com/Heaven-Hell-Psychology-Neel-Burton-ebook/dp/B00X87MDIY/ref=mt_kindle?_encoding=UTF8&me=), and other books.