

Preface

We are delighted to offer opening comments on the collection of new contributions in *Clinical Perspectives on Meaning: Positive and Existential Psychotherapy*. As a whole, the book signals important advances in the use of meaning-making activities to improve human lives. We highlight these strides forward via four themes that are evident across the chapters. A first and foremost theme is *building on the legacy of logotherapy*. These chapters include the varieties of present-day therapies that follow in the spirit of Viktor Frankl's remarkable life journey. His insights, embodied in logotherapy, helped people around the world appreciate the life-sustaining strengths that follow from choosing to find, and indeed create, meaning in encounters with very difficult experiences. Contributing authors in this volume extend that early work in multiple ways by linking it to aspects of cognitive-behavior therapy as well as formulations in positive psychology. Across chapters many authors highlight the theoretical and clinical commonalities between existential and positive psychology, suggesting that the former paved the way for the modern approach to positive human functioning. Several bridges connect these two disciplines, from the concepts of resilience and thriving, to goal pursuit and hope, to the model of character strengths and virtues. Other chapters describe the importance of meaning in clinical settings and they offer useful reviews of different types of meaning-centered therapies, along with evidence as to their general effectiveness. Meaning-making in mental health settings is now linked with posttraumatic growth and possible related gains in self-efficacy and positive reappraisal. Other novel interventions include exercises in existential gratitude. Importantly, the absence of meaning—that is, living in an existential vacuum wherein one is prone to boredom—is thoughtfully examined with emphasis on how these conditions can increase risk for substance use disorders. Indeed, the common perspective of all these contributions suggests that meaning in life should be the final and more important aim of any psychotherapeutic approach, from standard cognitive-behavioral therapy, to counseling, to mindfulness techniques to positive psychotherapies. Together, these topics reveal valuable new directions in therapies that take meaning-making seriously and deepen and enrich it via connections to new domains.

A second theme pertains to *meaning-making in the face of physical health challenges*. Contributing authors in this area focus on the challenges of living with chronic illness, where conceptions of healing and suffering require new formulations that seek to address and alleviate the loneliness of illness, while also encouraging the exploration of meaning in a physically compromised life. The field of psycho-oncology is present in other contributing chapters that focus on meaning-centered activities among cancer patients. Therapies in this domain seek to nurture resilience and effective coping and, if need be, help patients face limited time horizons. In this framework, the concept of spirituality and sanctification appears to be particularly linked to meaning-making processes. The pursuit of purpose and peace is framed, as it should be, as fundamental to approaching the end of life. Other traumatic health events, such as spinal cord injury, are included as well. This profoundly life-changing event is presented as offering unique opportunities to bring meaning-making activities into traditional rehabilitation practices, thereby enriching conceptions of adjustment in the aftermath of disability. Importantly, the need to educate doctors and therapists in order to address these existential issues with their patients could provide a new valuable area of development for positive psychology and positive health. Collectively, these diverse chapters signal important new directions in enlightened healthcare.

Outside the therapeutic context, *meaning-making in day-to-day life* is a third prominent theme. Here the reader finds contributions that view meaningful living as a grassroots endeavor embodied by the positive health movement. Such initiatives are intended to bring out the good and noble side of human beings, while also providing skills to transform the dark side of the human experience. Other nonclinical perspectives are elaborated via the character strengths and values emphasized in the positive psychology movement, and its related themes of hope and optimism. Another contribution focuses on a relational understanding of meaning that connects individuals to the life world that they inhabit. This linkage is relevant in educational contexts that involve the teaching of modification techniques intended as tools for volitional self-regulation. Caring is the focus of a further chapter that illuminates paths to meaning and purpose that follow from caring for one's significant others or for one's community. Both types of caring are framed as a kind of self-actualization that occurs via helping others to thrive and in working to make the world a better place. All of these contributions showcase how meaning-making in day-to-day life experience can enrich the human spirit and the human condition.

A final theme reflects questions regarding the *when, where, and how of meaning-making*. Chapters in this part of the book take meaning-making activities outside traditional therapies and practices in health contexts (mental or physical) into new, largely uncharted territories. One chapter focuses on *when* in the life course it may be particularly important to cultivate a sense of purpose in life. The emphasis is on adolescents, where research suggests there is an absence of purpose among many. Strategies are thus suggested for helping to foster purpose in the lives of young people. The question of *where* is evident in a chapter on meaning vis-à-vis multiculturalism—this contribution emphasizes the universal need for meaning, while noting the importance of attending to cultural influences on how individuals think

about and find purpose in their lives. The present historical context is rife with ethno-political tensions and struggles—contributing authors on this topic examine the possibilities for healthy functioning amidst such strife. Specific attention is given to the possible importance of secondary control, wherein one adjusts aspects of the self and accepts circumstances as they are. The relevance of such a stance for coping with daily stressors related to war exposure is considered. The question of *how* is engaged via a contribution that examines nostalgia—specifically, the use of the past as a resource to help people regulate stress and find meaning and strength from autobiographical experience. The boundaries of meaning-making are pushed in a chapter calling for meaninglessness to be respected for its own integrity. This contribution pushes the question of how into new territory, which recognizes the possibility that not finding meanings or reasons in certain difficult experiences may be its own existential reality that warrants empathic attunement among therapists.

These brief opening observations are meant to convey the depth and breadth of what is included in *Clinical Perspectives on Meaning: Positive and Existential Psychotherapy*. It is an outstanding collection of new contributions that build thoughtfully on the past, while at the same time take the uniquely human capacity for meaning-making to important new places.

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