

***INDIVIDUAL MEANING-CENTERED  
PSYCHOTHERAPY  
PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK***



**MEMORIAL SLOAN-KETTERING CANCER CENTER  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**



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# **INDIVIDUAL MEANING-CENTERED PSYCHOTHERAPY SESSION TOPICS & THEMES**

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\* *Introductions and Meaning*

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\* *Identity Before & After Cancer Diagnosis*

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\* *Life as Legacy that has been given [past]*

\**Life as Legacy that one lives[present]and gives future]*

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\* *Encountering Life's Limitations*

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\* *Actively Engaging in Life (creativity & responsibility)*

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\* *Connecting with Life (Love, Beauty & Humor)*

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\* *Endings and New Beginnings (hopes for the future)*

# SESSION ONE

## ~CONCEPTS & SOURCES OF MEANING~

### *Introductions & Meaning*

*Life holds meaning for each and every individual, and even more, it retains this meaning literally to his last breath. And the [therapist] can show his patient that life never ceases to have a meaning. To be sure, he cannot show his patient what the meaning is, but he may well show him that there is a meaning, and that life retains it: that it remains meaningful, under any conditions... Even the tragic and negative aspects of life, such as unavoidable suffering, can be turned into a human achievement by the attitude which a man adopts toward his predicament... transforming despair into triumph.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1969, ix)*  
*The Will to Meaning'*

# HANDOUT 1

## Structured Weekly Topics for Individual Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy

**Session #1:** Concepts & Sources of Meaning

**Session #2:** Cancer & Meaning

**Session #3:** Historical Sources of Meaning

**Session #4:** Attitudinal Sources of Meaning

**Session #5:** Creative Sources of Meaning

**Session #6:** Experiential Sources of Meaning

**Session #7:** Transitions (reflections & hopes for future)

## HANDOUT 2

### ***INDIVIDUAL MEANING-CENTERED PSYCHOTHERAPY***

Inspired by the works of Viktor Frankl: '*Man's Search for Meaning*'

Meaning Centered Psychotherapy Basic Concepts:

1. THE WILL TO MEANING: The need to find meaning in human existence is a basic primary motivating force shaping human behavior.
2. LIFE HAS MEANING: The possibility to create or experience meaning exists throughout our lives, even up to the last moments of life. If we feel life is meaningless, it is not because there is no meaning in our lives, it is because we have become disconnected from meaning.
3. FREEDOM OF WILL: We have the Freedom to find meaning in our existence and to choose our attitude towards suffering and limitations.

*“He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how”*

# HANDOUT 3

## Sources of Meaning

- ❖ **Historical Sources** – *'Life as a Living Legacy'*
  - Legacy that's been given (past)
  - Legacy one lives (present)
  - Legacy one will give (future)
- ❖ **Attitudinal Sources** – *'Encountering Life's Limitations'*
  - turning personal tragedy into triumph via: the attitude taken toward given circumstances (e.g. physical suffering, personal adversity, one's mortality)
- ❖ **Creative Sources** – *'Actively Engaging in Life'*
  - via: roles, work, deeds, accomplishments
  - re: courage, commitment & responsibility
- ❖ **Experiential Sources** – *'Connecting with Life'*
  - via: relationships, beauty, nature, humor

## HANDOUT 4

### Definitions of Meaning

- I. Having a sense that one's life has meaning involves the conviction that one is fulfilling a unique role and purpose in a life that is a gift.**
  - 1) *A life that comes with a responsibility to live to one's full potential as a human being.*
  - 2) *In so doing, being able to achieve a sense of peace, contentment or even transcendence through connectedness with something greater than one's self.*
- II. Meaningfulness refers to moments when you feel most alive, connected to existence. Things from the past that, whether tragic or joyful, awesome or dreadful, when you look back on them, you find to be very life affirming and profound.**

# SESSION ONE

## EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

## *‘Meaningful Moments’*

*List one or two experiences or moments when life has felt particularly meaningful to you, and say something about it. This may be a special event or person; it may sound powerful or mundane. It could be something that helped get you through a difficult day, or a time when you felt most alive, or a moment that deeply touched you.*

# SESSION TWO

## TOPIC: ‘CANCER & MEANING’

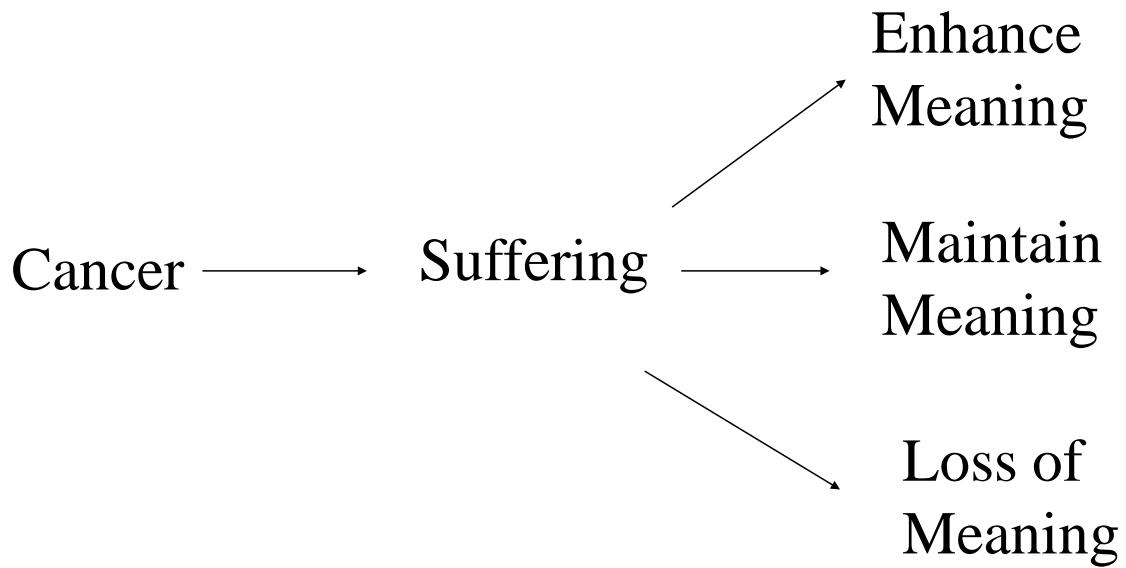
### ~ IDENTITY ~ BEFORE & AFTER CANCER DIAGNOSIS

*We must never forget that we may find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation, such as inoperable cancer, we are challenged to change ourselves. ’*

*Viktor Frankl (1957, p. 116)*

*Man’s Search for Meaning’*

## Cancer and Meaning



# SESSION TWO

## **EXERCISE (TO BE DISCUSSED IN SESSION)**

## *'Identity & Cancer'*

*Our identity is influenced to a great deal by the people, roles, and other aspects of our life that gives our lives meaning. Identity and meaning are closely related in that identity is composed of what gives meaning to your life. This session explores meaning in your life before and after cancer through an exploration of your identity.*

#1. Answer this question from your perspective before your diagnosis of cancer: Write down four answers to the question, "Who am I?" These can be positive or negative, and include personality characteristics, body image, beliefs, things you do, people you know, etc... For example, answers might start with, "I am someone who \_\_\_\_\_," or "I am a \_\_\_\_\_"...

#2. *How has cancer affected your answers? How has it affected your identity and the things that are most meaningful to you?*

# SESSION THREE

## ~HISTORICAL SOURCES OF MEANING~

*Life as a Legacy  
that has been given*

*In the past nothing is irrevocably lost,*

*but everything is irrevocably stored.*

*People only see the stubble field of life's transitoriness,*

*but overlook the full granaries of the past*

*in which they have delivered and deposited,*

*in which they have saved their harvest.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1969, p. 159)  
'The Will to Meaning'*

# SESSION THREE

## TOPIC: 'HISTORICAL SOURCES OF MEANING'

### LIFE AS A LIVING LEGACY:

A Legacy That Has Been Given;  
A Legacy That One Lives & Will Give

*In the past nothing is irrevocably lost,*

*but everything is irrevocably stored.*

*People only see the stubble field of life's transitoriness,*

*but overlook the full granaries of the past*

*in which they have delivered and deposited,*

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*Viktor Frankl (1969, p. 159)  
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# SESSION THREE

## EXERCISE (TO BE DISCUSSED IN SESSION)

## *'Life as a Legacy' That Has Been Given*

*When you look back on your life, upbringing, and family history, what are the most significant memories, relationships, traditions, values, etc., which have made the greatest impact on who you are today? For example: identify specific memories of how you were raised that made a lasting impression (e.g., your relationship with grandparents, parents, children, siblings, friends, teachers, etc.). Sometimes the origin of your name is a meaningful key to your family's legacy. What is the origin of your name?*

## *The Legacy You Will Live and Give*

*As you reflect upon who you are today, what are the meaningful activities, roles, or accomplishments that you are most proud of? As you look toward the future, what are some of the life lessons you have learned along the way and values you may feel are important that you would want to pass on to others? What is the legacy you hope to live and give?*

# SESSION THREE

## HOMEWORK

# ~Share Your Legacy~ Tell Your Story

*Tell your story to loved one(s) in your life in any manner that is comfortable to you. The key is to highlight experiences that have been sources of pride and meaning for you, or things you wish you had accomplished, but have yet to do. As you share your story, start becoming aware of how it feels to have your words witnessed, validated, and affirmed by those who matter most.*

# SESSION FOUR

## TOPIC: ATTITUDINAL SOURCES OF MEANING

### ~ *ENCOUNTERING LIFE'S LIMITATIONS* ~

*“Any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, ‘He who has a **why** to live for can bear with almost any **how**,’ could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic efforts. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a **why**—an **aim**—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible **how** of their existence...”*

*“What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life...it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life.”*

*Viktor Frankl (1959, pp.84-85)  
‘Man’s Search for Meaning’*

*“Life gives us many things. Some appear to be wonderful, and some appear to be tragic. What is most important is to utilize our freedom to choose how we respond to what life gives us.”*

*William Breitbart, M.D.*

# SESSION FOUR

## EXERCISE (TO BE DISCUSSED IN SESSION)

## *'Encountering Life's Limitations'*

#1. *What are some of the life limitations, losses, or obstacles have you faced in the past, and how did you cope or deal with them at the time?*

#2. Since your diagnosis, what are the specific limitations or losses you have faced, and how are you coping or dealing with them now? Are you still able to find meaning in your daily life despite your awareness of the limitations and finiteness of life? [If yes, please briefly describe.]

#3. *What would you consider a 'good' or 'meaningful' death? How can you imagine being remembered by your loved ones? (e.g., what are some of your personal characteristics, the shared memories, or meaningful life events that have made a lasting impression on them?)*

## *‘Legacy Project’*

*We want to remind you of the theme 'Life as a Living Legacy' through creating your own 'legacy project.' This is a project that you can undertake that integrates some of the ideas we have already discussed (e.g., meaning, identity, creativity, responsibility), in order to generate a sense of meaning in light of your life and illness. Some examples may be: creating a legacy photo album or video, developing a music compilation of meaningful songs, mending a broken relationship, undertaking something you've always wanted to do and have not yet done...the legacy is up to you!*

# SESSION FIVE

## ~CREATIVE SOURCES OF MEANING~ *Creativity, Courage & Responsibility*

*'The noblest appreciation of meaning is reserved to those people who, deprived of the opportunity to find meaning in a deed, in a work, or in love, by the very attitude which they choose to this predicament, rise above it and grow beyond themselves. What matters is the stand they take—a stand which allows for transmuting their predicament into achievement, triumph and heroism.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1969, p. 70)  
'The Will to Meaning'*

*'As each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of the meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is being asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1959, p. 113)  
'Man's Search for Meaning'*

# SESSION FIVE

## EXERCISE (TO BE DISCUSSED IN SESSION)

## *'Creativity, Courage & Responsibility'*

- #1. *Living life and being creative requires courage and commitment. Can you think of time(s) in your life when you've been courageous, taken ownership of your life, or made a meaningful commitment to something of value to you?*
- #2. *Do you feel you've expressed what is most meaningful to you through your life's work and creative activities (e.g., job, parenting, hobbies, causes)?—If so, how?*
- #3. *What are your responsibilities? Who are you responsible to and for?*
- #4. *Do you have unfinished business? What tasks have you always wanted to do, but have yet to undertake? What's holding you back from responding to this creative call?*

# SESSION SIX

## ~EXPERIENTIAL SOURCES OF MEANING ~

### *Connecting with Life through...*

### *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.'*

### *Beauty*

*'As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances...Despite that factor—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature's beauty, which we had missed for so long.'*

### *Humor*

*'Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well-known that humor more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation...The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1959, pp. 48-55)  
Man's Search for Meaning'*

# SESSION SIX

## EXERCISE (TO BE DISCUSSED IN SESSION)

[Homework from Session #6]

### *'Connecting with Life'*

*List 3 ways in which you 'connect with life' and feel most alive through the experiential sources of:*

#### ❖ *Love*

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_

#### ❖ *Beauty*

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_

#### ❖ *Humor*

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_

# SESSION SEVEN

## ~ TRANSITIONS ~

### ENDINGS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

### *Reflections*

### &

### *Thoughts for the Future*

*'It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live  
by looking to the future.*

*And this is his salvation  
in the most difficult moments of his existence.'*

~ ~

*'Whoever was still alive had reason for hope.*

*Whatever we had gone through  
could still be an asset to us in the future.*

*And I quoted from Nietzsche:  
'That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.'*

*Viktor Frankl (1959, pp. 81 & 89)  
'Man's Search for Meaning'*

# SESSION SEVEN

## ~ TRANSITIONS ~

### *ENDINGS AND NEW BEGINNINGS*

### *Reflections &*

### *Thoughts for the Future*

#1. *What has it been like for you to go through this learning experience over these last seven sessions? Have there been any changes in the way you view your life and cancer experience having been through this process?*

#2. *Do you feel like you have a better understanding of the sources of meaning in life and are you able to use them in your daily life? If so, how?*

#3. *What are your hopes for the future?*

