



The comprehensive guide to

Inner Growth Through Adversity

by Sarah Toussaint Ortiz

Key Findings

Drawing from extensive literature research and my own qualitative exploration, I share profound insights that illuminate the path to resilience and inner growth through adversity.

Practical Advice

One thing is clear: adverse experiences change us. The monumental question is: HOW? Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy has answers.

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Have we underestimated the human capacity to grow after hardship?

How can we help redirect the inner journey from a downward spiral to an upward trajectory after experiencing adversity?

Self-transcendence, Personal Growth, Wisdom, Adversity, Trauma, Logotherapy, Viktor Frankl, Resilience, Post-traumatic Growth, Stress-related Growth, Positive Adjustment, Positive Adaptation, Thriving

When faced with a crisis, it can be difficult to imagine the experience will eventually lead to some kind of personal growth.



To be human means to experience what Viktor Frankl calls *The Tragic Triad*—suffering, guilt and death. Yet, particularly in Western culture, the dominant social narrative—centered on the pursuit of eternal happiness — often attempts to deny this reality. As a result, there is a lack of awareness and education around adversity, which can leave people feeling helpless and disoriented when hardship inevitably arises. That, I believe, has devastating consequences that could possibly be avoided or dimmed. If pain, loss, and adversity are universal human experiences, there needs to be comprehensive knowledge and competence in navigating them with wisdom and resilience.

One thing is clear: adverse experiences change us. The monumental question is: HOW? How can we help individuals redirect their journey from a downward spiral to an upward trajectory after experiencing adversity? The aim of my research was to better understand the conditions, factors and interventions under which people can experience meaningful changes after going through highly stressful adverse events.

Inner Growth Through Adversity

— A New Understanding of Resilience

Why inner growth through adversity matters

The underlying question is: Wouldn't a meaningful life education provide the tools to face adversity with greater clarity and strength?

The need to understand the meaning and potential of adversity is more urgent than ever. *VUCA* is an acronym, first used in 1987 and based on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, and stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. It was the response of the US Army War College to the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s. Yet when we zoom in and out between our personal lives and the state of the world today, we realize that being human means to live in a VUCA world.

And it is not just living in this kind of world, it is being human that comes with the experience of adversity. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 90 percent of us will experience at least one serious adverse event during our lives (Norris & Sloane, 2007). At least one specific source of pain lives inside each of us and colors the way we see the world: They can shatter our fundamental assumptions about the world — that people are good, the world is just, and our environment is a safe and predictable place. They can breed ignorance, cynicism and hatred.

Who This Guide Is For

This guide is for you—whether you are a mental health professional, a coach, a caregiver, or simply an individual seeking more understanding and more tools to navigate life's challenges with greater resilience and meaning.

Adversity is a universal part of the human experience, and my intention in sharing this guide is to provide a framework for understanding and practical signposts that can serve you on your personal journey or empower you to support others. Whether you are guiding clients, loved ones, or yourself through difficult times, this resource offers insights drawn from research, logotherapy, and real-life experiences to help transform hardship into an opportunity for growth and deeper meaning. Feel free to share it with your network.

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“Man’s freedom is no freedom from conditions but rather freedom to take a stand on whatever conditions might confront him.”

— Viktor Frankl



Psychological Foundations: Understanding Growth Through Adversity

Outcomes Following Adversity

Adversity impacts individuals in profoundly different ways. As Southwick and Charney (2012) note, no two people respond to trauma in exactly the same manner. Some move forward as if the trauma never occurred, while others develop conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), struggle with prolonged distress, or eventually adapt so they can “function” with healthy coping mechanisms. A subset of individuals, however, experience something remarkable: they become more resilient, gain deeper insight, and find new purpose as a result of their struggles.

Research in psychotraumatology has identified three primary trajectories following adversity (Linley & Joseph, 2005):

- Psychopathology – Persistent distress and psychological challenges.
- Resilience – The ability to return to a previous baseline of functioning.
- Adversarial Growth – The capacity to transform hardship into personal growth and greater meaning.

Adversarial Growth: A Transformative Perspective

Traditionally, resilience has been understood as the ability to “bounce back” after hardship. However, research over the last few decades has uncovered an even more profound possibility: growth through adversity. Elisabeth Lukas, a protégé of Viktor Frankl, stated, “The forces of fate that bear down on man and threaten to break him also have the capacity to ennoble him.” This perspective suggests that, under the right conditions, suffering can serve as a catalyst for increased strength, wisdom, and purpose.

Adversarial growth, often referred to as Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), was first conceptualized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). Their research with trauma survivors revealed five common ways in which individuals grow following adversity:

- 1. Renewed appreciation for life**
- 2. Enhanced personal strength**
- 3. Stronger, more meaningful relationships**
- 4. Spiritual growth**
- 5. Recognition of new paths and purposes**

For instance, individuals who have survived cancer frequently report a newfound gratitude for everyday moments. Others channel their pain and grief into advocacy or service.

What Drives Adversarial Growth?

The Power of Perspective

Research shows that it's not the severity of adversity, nor the passing of time that determines whether someone grows—it's how they interpret their experience.

Two key factors shape this process:

- 1. How one makes sense of what happened**
- 2. How the event challenges the core beliefs about oneself and the world**

This aligns with Viktor Frankl's insights: the way we assign meaning to suffering shapes how we experience it. Those who find purpose in hardship are more likely to endure, adapt, and even grow.

Time Alone

Doesn't Heal —

Introspection &

Meaning Discovery
Does

Inner Growth Through Adversity

Tips

What Supports Growth After Hardship?

Here's are the key findings from literature research as well as my own: factors that influence whether a person experiences growth after adversity:

- **Prioritizing physical and emotional well-being through self-care and movement.**
- **Processing emotions with awareness and acceptance.**
- **Shifting mindset: Facing fear with a balanced, realistic, yet hopeful perspective.**
- **Building resilience through strong, supportive relationships.**
- **Staying true to personal values and, for some, spiritual practices.**
- **Finding meaning in challenges through reflection, philosophy, or spirituality.**
- **Embracing humor and lightness, even in difficult times.**
- **Taking responsibility for emotional well-being and using adversity for personal growth.**

By actively engaging in reflection and reframing our experiences, we can transform adversity into a catalyst for personal growth.



How Logotherapy Support Inner Growth Through Adversity

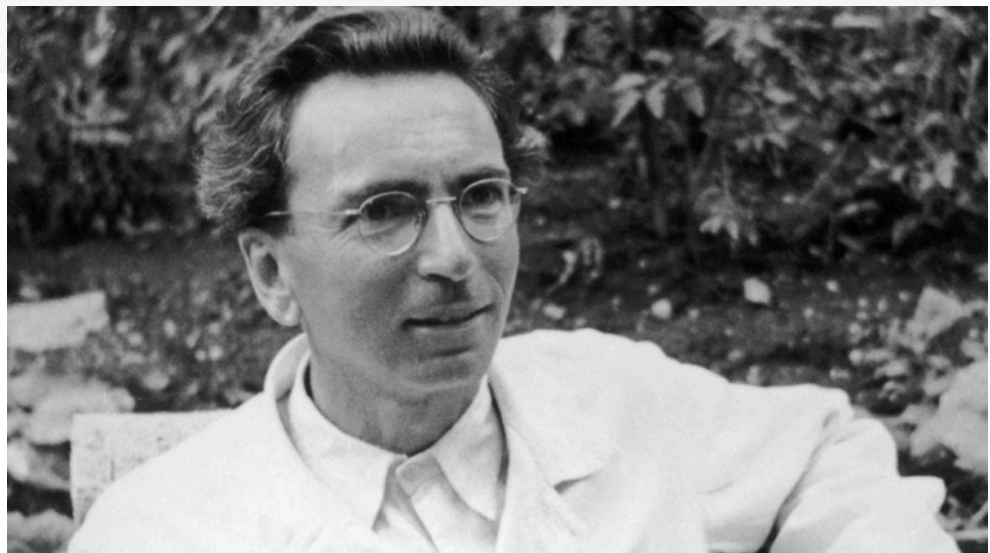
Logotherapy, developed by Viktor Frankl, is a meaning-centered psychotherapeutic approach based on three pillars: Freedom of Will, Will to Meaning, and the Meaning of Life. It asserts that humans are fundamentally driven by the search for meaning, even in suffering.

Frankl's experiences in concentration camps were a confirmation of his theory and led him to conclude that people can choose their attitude toward circumstances, and through meaning, transcend suffering. Logotherapy's absolutes include the belief in objective meaning, human responsibility, and the capacity for self-transcendence—going beyond oneself in pursuit of a higher purpose.

A core concept is distinguishing fate (suffering, guilt, death) from freedom (choosing one's response, pursuing meaning, finding life's purpose). Frankl emphasized that suffering without meaning leads to despair, while meaning transforms adversity into personal growth.

Self-transcendence

plays a crucial role in adversarial growth by shifting focus outward—toward values, relationships, and purpose—rather than inward toward suffering. By discovering a “why,” individuals can endure almost any hardship. This perspective frames adversity not as mere hardship but as an opportunity for deeper personal and spiritual development.



How to Find and Realize Meaning – Frankl's 3 Pathways

Precisely because human beings are meaning-seekers, our suffering is intensified by our lack of the perceived loss of meaning that accompanies every experience of adversity. According to Frankl, meaning always transcends the self, reaching beyond the individual. Frankl said, "Suffering without meaning causes despair". And we know that it is often the emotional state of despair that leads to violence, especially towards the self.

Creative Values



Meaning is realized through action: creating, contributing, working, or expressing oneself artistically. Acts of love and service also fall into this category.

"What is one thing I can create or express today that feels true to me?"

Experiential Values



Meaning emerges from openness and receptiveness to life's beauty, such as appreciating nature, art, or deep human connections.

"What moment of beauty or connection can I fully take in today?"

Attitudinal Values

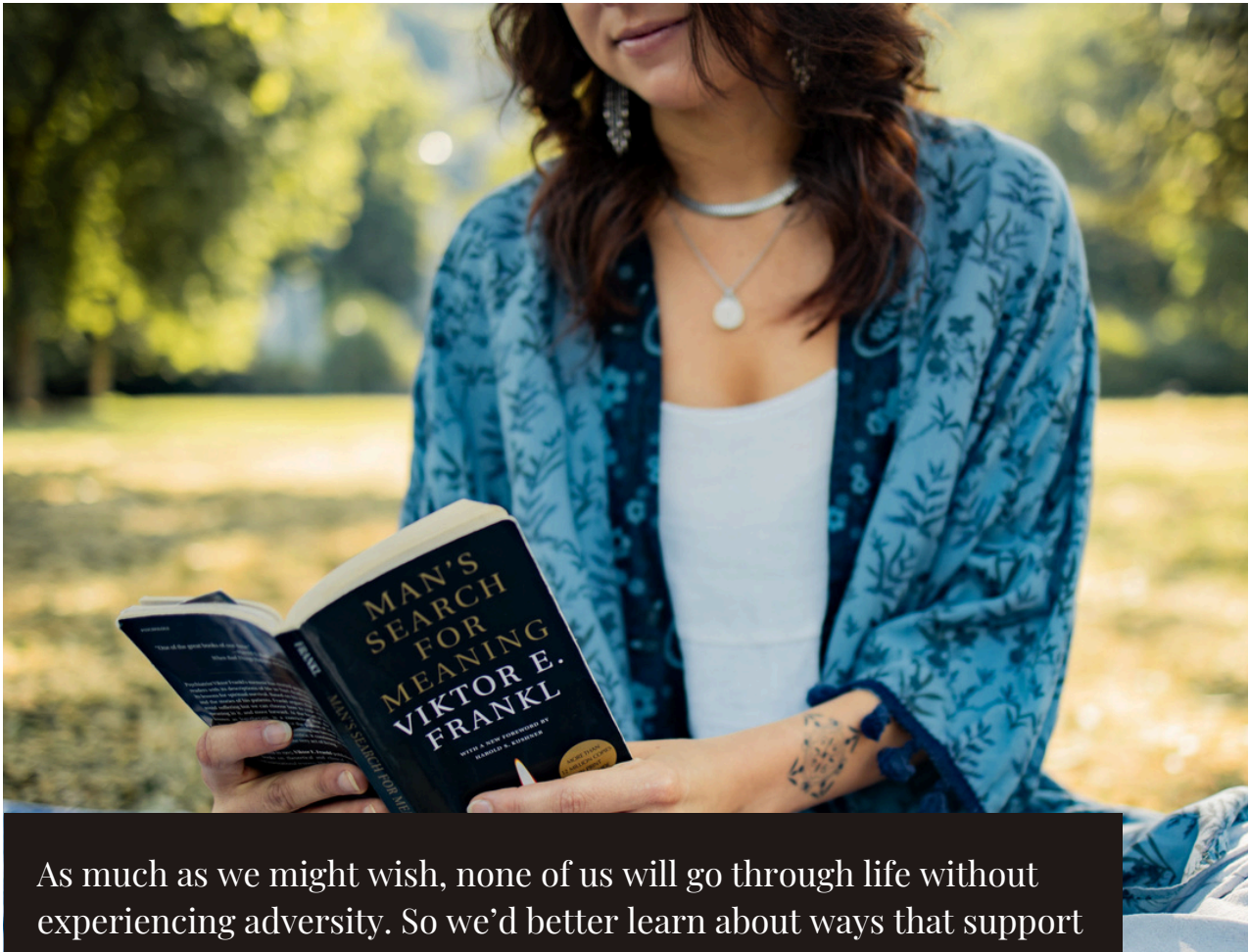


When facing unavoidable suffering or hardship, meaning is found in choosing one's attitude. This is the highest form of meaning realization, as it affirms human freedom and resilience.

"Is there a perspective on this challenge that reveals a deeper meaning?"

"In this challenge, what attitude can I choose that aligns with my deepest values?"

Inner Growth Through Adversity



As much as we might wish, none of us will go through life without experiencing adversity. So we'd better learn about ways that support us so we can find courage, resilience, and a sense of meaning

That's why it's crucial to learn how to transcend adversity

Adversarial growth is not about glorifying suffering but rather acknowledging its potential to spark profound transformation. It might just be this key of response-ability (the human freedom to choose our attitude in any given situation), of meaning discovery and connection that offers ways out of the labyrinth of despair and on new paths of inner growth and empowerment. And my intention and wish are that more people

learn about and are supported by logotherapy to grow through the unavoidable adversity every one of us faces. More than ever, I understand that we are not merely the consequences of what happens to us. That belief is too simplistic—it denies our inherent ability to transcend, to choose, and to shape our own narrative.

***Inner growth
through adversity is
deeply connected to
self-reflection,
meaning-making,
and intentional
action.***

Logotherapy emphasizes that human beings have the capacity to find meaning even in suffering, and it is this meaning that allows them to transcend hardship, rather than be defined by it.

There is a big and diverse network of logotherapists around the world. For logotherapeutic counselling inquiries, please send an email to sarah@unfoldwithsarah.com



Comprehensive Guide

Inner Growth through Adversity

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Resilience & Inner Growth Through Adversity

For inquiries or to request the full research paper, "Inner Growth Through Adversity – Transcending Hardship and Cultivating Inner Growth with Logotherapy," please feel free to email me.

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