Self-Logotherapy, Mindfulness Meditation, Terror Management Theory, the Coronavirus Pandemic, and the Trump Presidency

Abstract: In this article the relationships between self-logotherapy, mindfulness meditation, terror management theory, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Trump presidency are described through the lens of various authors, supplemented by a relevant personal experience of the present author. The conclusion is that self-logotherapy and mindfulness meditation are potentially powerful and effective tools to constructively deal with the terror management consequences of both the coronavirus pandemic and the Trump presidency.

Keywords: self-logotherapy, mindfulness meditation, terror management theory, coronavirus pandemic, Trump presidency.

INTRODUCTION

The whole world is presently living through a tragic and deadly period of time due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, in the United States this tragic and deadly period of time has been compounded by the actions and non-actions of President Donald Trump (Sumner, 2020a). The reality of the threat of death has become prominent for many people throughout the world, with the United States having by far the most number of coronavirus cases and deaths in the world (Gutiérrez & Clarke, 2020). People have different ways of coping with the reality of the threat of death, which has been comprehensively described by terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2015). In this article I will describe the coping mechanism of what I refer to as self-logotherapy in the context of applying Viktor 2)

Frankl’s (1959/1985) logotherapy to oneself in the form of self-therapy, in conjunction with Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (1990/2013, 2005) exposition of mindfulness meditation, illustrated by my own personal experience, to survive the compounded threat induced by both the coronavirus pandemic and United States President Donald Trump.

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I have written extensively, as well as given talks at a number of conferences, about the dangers and destruction induced by Donald Trump as President of the United States, for over 3 years before the coronavirus pandemic appeared on the scene. However, the advent of the coronavirus pandemic has brought the level of this danger and destruction to a whole new level, with at the time of this writing (October, 2020) over 215,000 Americans having died from the coronavirus, including many thousands of people in the United States needlessly dying from Trump’s criminal negligence and misconduct in regard to how he has dealt with the coronavirus pandemic, with many more thousands of people expected to die in the next few months (Sumner, 2020a, 2020b). At the present time we are less than 3 weeks away from the United States presidential election, with Trump’s Democratic contender, former vice president Joe Biden, leading Trump by wide margins in all national polls and most battleground states polls (Eleveld, 2020). Nevertheless, it is still quite possible that Trump may be able to manage to secure another 4 years as United States president, through “stealing” the election; i.e., falsely claiming the election was fraudulent due to inauthentic mail-in ballots, delaying in the courts the determination of the victor in key battleground states, and ultimately the presidency being decided by the Republican majority status of the House of Representatives, with its one vote per state gross misrepresentation of the populace (Reeves, 2020; Wirth & Rogers, 2020). Trump was supposedly planning on “October surprises,” one orchestrated by attorney general Barr and some high ranking Republicans, where he hoped that with the help of Russia, more “dirt” on Biden would make big news a few days before the election (Lipp, 2020), in an attempt to weaken Biden in a similar way to how the massively publicized e-mail public spectacle weakened Hillary Clinton in 2016, helping Trump to become president. 3)
However, this did not come into fruition and his other hoped for other October surprise of a coronavirus vaccine being made available to the public is not going to happen before the election, which is related to serious concerns from medical health experts about a rushed vaccine’s safety and effectiveness (Rucker et al., 2020). But it turns out that there was a big unanticipated October surprise, which is that Trump himself was infected by the coronavirus, though he did not receive either an outpouring of sympathy or a boost in the polls from contacting the virus (Durtsgnam, 2020).

I experience the nightmare scenario which has been described above as Trump “stealing” the election, to be a viable and literal death threat, as described by terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2015). For a long time I was not able to honestly deal with the very real possibility that Trump could secure another 4 years as United States president. But this possible reality is not something I can avoid dealing with any longer, and consequently I have needed to find therapeutic outlets for me to continue to function effectively in the world, in the event that Trump is successful in continuing as the United States president for 4 more years. And a primary therapeutic outlet that I have been using to prepare for what I experience as a possible terrifying disastrous future of 4 more years of United States President Trump is what I refer to as self-logotherapy enhanced by mindfulness meditation.

In the next section I will describe the basics of terror management theory inclusive of an examination of its relationship to the coronavirus pandemic, to give a poignant academic description of the current state of affairs in the world in regard to this pandemic.

Terror Management Theory and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Terror management theory (TMT) is a deep, comprehensive, research validated theory, with over 500 academic studies over a period of 35 years, about the impactful consequences of the existential reality that human beings know they will someday die (Pyszczynski et al., in press; Solomon et al., 2015) According to TMT: 4).

Awareness of death in an animal with inherent proclivity for self-preservation gives rise to an ever-present potential for existential terror. This potential for terror is managed by an anxiety-buffering system of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close interpersonal relationships. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

Pyszczynski et al., (in press) described two distinct systems to manage death anxiety:

People manage death anxiety with two distinct systems, referred to as proximal and distal defenses. . . . When death-related thoughts are conscious (in current focal attention), proximal defenses are activated to suppress such thoughts or push death into the distant future by denying one’s vulnerability to things that could kill, or intending to engage in healthier behavior to ensure a longer life. However, when death-related thoughts are on the fringes of consciousness (no longer in focal attention but still highly accessible), people activate distal defenses focused on maintaining faith in their cultural worldview and enhancing self-esteem.

In particular, relating terror management theory to the coronavirus pandemic, Pyszczynski et al., (in press) made a number of connections and associations, as they conveyed that “the enormous death toll and highly contagious nature of the virus play especially important roles in spawning the diverse forms of turmoil that have resulted from this crisis.” They elaborated further on this theme as follows:

The personal, social, economic, and political costs of the COVID-19 crisis are unprecedented. From the perspective of TMT, the root cause of all of these problems is glaringly obvious—the risk of dying from the virus. Regardless of how contagious and lethal the virus ultimately turns out to be, or what one consciously thinks about it, the possibility of dying from it is highly salient and evident in ever-increasing death toll statistics, vivid images of overburdened hospitals and makeshift morgues, and the testimonials to victims of the virus, both famous and unknown. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

Pyszczynski et al., (in press) then related the deadliness of the coronavirus to the concepts of meaning, self-esteem, social isolation, and loss of jobs:

The world has suddenly become an even more chaotic, confusing, and hostile place, in which death lurks around every corner, and people struggle to maintain meaning and self-esteem. People are living with the very real threat of death from the pandemic, combined with challenges to their worldviews, loss of jobs, impediments to career goals, and isolation from friends and family who normally validate one’s significance. From a TMT perspective, it is currently far more difficult for virtually all of us to manage the terror of death.

TMT views the current ways that people are dealing with the death threat of the coronavirus pandemic in the context of both proximal and distal defense mechanisms, which can each have positive or negative repercussions. Some proximal defenses with diversion-seeking negative repercussions have been conveyed as follows:

Given the high level of media coverage, the changes in daily life that provide a constant reminder of the pandemic, and the extent to which virus-related concerns dominate conversations and media reporting, completely avoiding the issue is impossible. But there is evidence of increases in diversion-seeking behavior,
such as alcohol consumption...excessive eating...and binge-watching television. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

Pyszczynski et al., (in press) also described proximal defenses characterized by minimizing one's perception of the threat:

Another form of proximal defense involves minimizing one's perceptions of the threat. This has taken the form of arguing that the virus is not nearly as contagious or lethal as health experts claim it to be...or that it is only lethal for the elderly or those already at-risk of dying from other diseases...Others have trivialized the virus by comparing it to common illnesses such as the seasonal flu...focusing on other common causes of death...or viewing the publicity given the pandemic as originating in a politically motivated conspiracy.

Furthermore, Pyszczynski et al., (in press) conveyed how this form of proximal defense may take shape when the dire reality of sickness and death from the virus becomes more difficult to deny:

When sky-rocketing death statistics and vivid instances of contagion and mortality in the media make it hard to deny the problem outright, people sometimes claim that death rates are inflated to increase the funding hospitals receive...or to bolster the aforementioned conspiracy to damage government leaders.

However, many people are engaging in proximal defenses with positive repercussions:

Another, likely more adaptive, form of proximal defense against COVID-19 is to follow the prescriptions for avoiding infection provided by the medical community. This may be the most common proximal response to the pandemic; surveys suggest that 92% of people have followed guidelines for avoiding infection, to at least some extent...Most people have engaged in some form of social distancing, increased sanitation practices such as hand-washing and cleaning surfaces, wore masks in public places, and done other things to stay healthy. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

In regard to distal defense mechanisms to deal with the death threat of the coronavirus pandemic, one prominent outcome involves differences in political attitudes and behaviors, inclusive of a partisan divide in attitudes and behavior related to the virus:

Liberals tend to view the virus as much more dangerous than conservatives, report considerable more personal distress about it, and have greater confidence in what scientists and medical professionals have to say about it...Conservatives, on the other hand, view the virus as less dangerous and are more likely to assign blame to China and other foreigners and view the virus as part of a conspiracy to discredit Donald Trump. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

These differences in political attitudes and behaviors between liberals and conservatives have become intensive and volatile with their focus on President Trump and the easing of restrictions in regard to opening up the economy:

Though surveys have documented this divide since before President Trump was elected, there is an even wider divergence regarding his overall handling of the pandemic...A political divide is also evident in attitudes toward easing restrictions and reopening businesses and public places [including schools], with conservatives much more in favor of such policies than liberals. Whereas liberals tend to approve of societal restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus, conservatives tend to view them as unwarranted infringements on freedom, and not worth the cost to the economy and individual incomes. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

It is especially concerning that these intensive and volatile differences in attitudes and behaviors between liberals and conservatives have now become associated with violence:

In many US cities, protests against government restrictions were primarily attended by conservatives, some brandishing assault rifles and white nationalist symbols...Despite initial sentiment that “we’re all in this together,” the pandemic has become yet another domain for ideological division. (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

There is a good deal of research that demonstrates the relationship of TMT to various psychological disorders, self-esteem, and social relationships, and this has direct bearing in regard to the coronavirus pandemic:

If fear of death does indeed motivate the pursuit of meaning in life, self-esteem, and close relationships, then problems managing death concerns exacerbated by the pandemic would leave people overwhelmed with anxiety and therefore more vulnerable to psychological disorder. Experimental research has shown that reminders of mortality exacerbate phobias, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, depressive affect, and anxiety [see Solomon et al., 2015]. This may help explain why a recent review found that the pandemic is associated with increased reports of anxiety, depression, and stress (Pyszczynski et al., in press)

Pyszczynski et al., (in press) described from the perspective of TMT some of the particular tragic complications and difficulties that people are facing in this pandemic crisis:

When people lose their jobs and cannot pursue their financial, educational, and career goals, they are losing important sources of self-esteem. Social relationships, which play such a major role in managing death fears, have also been hampered by the lockdown and social distancing measures. Single people looking for a potential life partner have largely had to put this
pursuit on hold. . . . Increased death awareness associated with the threat of COVID-19 is difficult to successfully manage because COVID-19 has undermined access to many aspects of people's anxiety buffers: compromised anxiety buffers leave people vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of death anxiety than usual. . . . One tragic example of this is that in order to keep hospitals and nursing homes safe, loved ones are often not allowed to be with their sicker or dying friends and family members. The result is people facing their own and their loved ones’ imminent death without the support systems that provide them with their deepest psychological security.

And finally, concluding the relationship of TMT to the death threat of the coronavirus pandemic on a more positive note:

Feelings of meaninglessness resulting from the loss of social relationships and self-esteem sources may be addressed by finding new sources of meaning, significance, and interpersonal connection; preferably ones that don’t increase the threat of contacting or spreading the virus.

Reported increases in home-based hobbies such as baking bread or exercise have become popular as a way to derive a sense of meaning and value during the pandemic. . . . Social events that have been cancelled have sometimes been redesigned as COVID-friendly occasions; for example, the increasing popularity of drive-in theaters, online education, outdoor activities such as hiking where one can socialize while maintaining distance, and virtual get-togethers for parties, weddings, and funerals. (Pyszczynski et al., in press) This positive association of terror management theory to the coronavirus pandemic through the promotion of new sources of meaning is the crux of the application of logotherapy and mindfulness meditation to our current pandemic challenge, as described next.

Self-Logotherapy, Mindfulness Meditation, and the Coronavirus Pandemic

In his formulation of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl (1959/1985) commonly conveyed in his works that “suffering ceases to be suffering the moment a person discovers meaning in the experience” (cited in Weathers et al., 2016, p. 154). Much of Frankl’s logotherapy psychotherapy is captured by one of his most often repeated far-reaching statements, which is a statement that is directly related to the practice of mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2005): “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom” (as cited in Wong, 2020, p. 19). Frankl conveyed the basic premise of his logotherapy psychotherapy poignantly in terms of what he described as “tragic optimism,” which has much similarity to the more recent theory of post-traumatic growth (Schulenberg, 2020; Weathers et al., 2016):

I speak of tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action. (Frankl, 1959/1985, p. 162)

Describing the central place of Frankl’s reliance on faith, Wong (2020) related Frankl’s concept of tragic optimism to our current coronavirus pandemic crisis impactfully as follows:

Frankl survived the Nazi death camps and proved that tragic optimism worked even in situations 10) much worse than what we have now. . . . What kept Frankl alive through multiple Nazi death camps was precisely his faith in a future reunion with his wife (not knowing that she was already dead), faith in the enthusiastic acceptance of logotherapy in the world, and faith in the inherent value and sanctity of life. . . . All our pursuits of meaningful work and meaningful relationships are initiated by faith and sustained by faith even when we were living in a hellhole. (pp. 24, 47)

Schulenberg (2020) emphasized Frankl’s central place of reliance on faith by including two famous statements, one by Frankl and the other by Nietzsche, in the opening page of his book:

“Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter”--Viktor E. Frankl (;) “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”--Friedrich Nietzsche. (Schulenberg, 2020, opening page)

In relation to Frankl’s above quote regarding the space between the stimulus and response, the practice of mindfulness meditation may serve as an important vehicle to enable one to step back and rise to the occasion of finding meaning in suffering. In this regard, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013) has described his formulation of mindfulness meditation as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MSBR), which is a “rigorous and systematic training in mindfulness, a form of meditation originally developed in the Buddhist traditions of Asia. Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness” (p. XLix). In regard to the challenges of stress, panic, and anxiety, all of which are intensively involved in our current coronavirus pandemic crisis, Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013) conveyed the following:

The stress in our lives is now so great and so insidious that more and more people are making the deliberate decision to understand it better and to find imaginative and creative ways to change how they are in relationship to it. . . . The application of mindfulness to chronic anxiety involved allowing the anxiety itself to become the object of our non-judgmental attention. . . . To 11) panic in a threatening situation is a
And it is exactly mindfulness meditation, as conveyed by Kabat-Zinn (1990/2013), in regard to the terror management of the coronavirus pandemic in “the face of crises and serious threats to your well-being” and “the full catastrophe of our fear and anxiety” that I believe is needed right now as the whole world is experiencing continuous mortal danger from this pandemic. Using the techniques of mindfulness meditation, along with logotherapy in the context of applying logotherapy to ourselves, is what I refer to as “self-logotherapy.” The basics of self-logotherapy, although without referring to it by this name, in relation to our current coronavirus pandemic crisis have been insightfully and impactfully described by Paul Wong (2020, p. 45), as he conveyed that “It takes nothing less than a resilience revolution to defeat the pandemic” and “The preventive measure of self-isolation may provide much needed time to discover your true self—perhaps, even to follow your deepest yearnings to become what you were meant to be.” Wong tied his advice to effectively deal with the coronavirus pandemic directly to Frankl’s tragic optimism perspective: 12)

Many people die with regrets because they never spent time doing self-reflection and making much needed changes. A time of disruption may also be a time of transformation. . . . “Everything can be taken from a man but . . . the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” (Viktor E. Frankl). (pp. 95, 118)

Self-Logotherapy and Mindfulness Meditation as a Therapeutic Coping Mechanism to Deal with The Disaster of the Trump Presidency: A Personal Experience

About 10 weeks ago I attended a 4-hour outdoor mindfulness meditation workshop in rural Maine, about an hour from where I live, that resulted in a very personal experience for me of what I have described above as self-logotherapy. It was both special and significant for me and my wife to attend this workshop, as it was a rare opportunity for us to share meditative experience and engage in meaningful interactions in a socially distanced safe atmosphere in nature, while in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

For me, the possibility of Trump getting reelected for 4 more years as President of the United States was a viable disaster that was directly linked to death and destruction through the coronavirus pandemic. The degradation of the environment, potential wars inclusive of a nuclear war, and widespread incitement of violence within the United States (Haque, 2020; Niewert, 2020b; Viser, 2020). My perspective of the disaster of Trump getting reelected for 4 more years is consistent with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) definition of a disaster that includes a “human-caused event that has resulted in severe property damage, deaths, and/or multiple injuries” as well as with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) definition of a disaster that includes “a serious disruption of the functioning of society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses, that exceeds the local capacity to respond, and calls for external assistance.” Furthermore, “Each disaster occurs in its own socio-political-cultural-economic context” and “Such disasters can have tremendous adverse effects on physical and mental well-being. These adverse effects can last for prolonged periods of time, affecting not only the individual, but the family and community as well.”

Toward the end of the workshop, we were instructed to find a place in the scenic backyard where we were engaging in our workshop, and commune with nature; i.e., just “be” with whatever invited us to merge with other immediate surroundings. Ordinarily this is the kind of exercise that I generally do not easily become immersed in, and I was not particularly looking forward to doing it. But as I was walking in the grass and viewing the soothing garden and trees, I came upon a circular enclosure of small trees and found myself wandering over to it. To my surprise, in the middle of this circular enclosure of trees was a large rock, and I decided to make this my commune with nature, for...
whatever I was able to get out of it. I figured that at least it would look like I found something to resonate with, and I could be part of the exercise. But as it turned out, I did not have to pretend to commune with nature, as I was resonating with my large rock and small trees. For whatever reason I found the experience to be both intriguing and relaxing, and after a few minutes I noticed that there were strawberries on some of the trees. Then I saw a butterfly swarming around the trees and rock, then a number of butterflies and various flying insects, one in particular that perhaps was a wasp. This 14)particular flying insect/wasp appeared to be taking a little snooze on one of the leaves of a tree, and was so immobile that I started to wonder if it really was a flying insect/wasp, or just a part of the leaf, and I had a passing inclination to go out and touch it. But it was good that I did not listen to my passing inclination, as after a while this flying insect/wasp flew away from and then flew back to the leaf, and I realized that if I had invaded this tranquil little scene that I could have gotten stung. Actually the fleeting thought entered my mind that I could still get stung, but I was not worried as I felt like I was part of nature observing what was going on in the trees and rock, and there was no reason for the flying insect/wasp to sting me.

Well this is far more than I have ever written about observing a scene in nature, so let me get to the main point here. The main point is that somehow or other, in the midst of my communion and observations, I came to terms with a preliminary acceptance of the devastating possibility of Donald Trump becoming president of the United States for 4 more years. I don’t know exactly how I came to terms with this, and I was fully aware that this was just a preliminary acceptance and would necessitate a good deal of reinforcement over the next few months. But I also knew that it was some kind of a major breakthrough for me, and that the mindfulness meditation coupled with my communion with nature, complete with the small trees, large rock, strawberries, and flying insect/wasp, were the ingredients that enabled me to experience this major breakthrough. Needless to say, this was an immense therapeutic experience for me, in the context of self-therapy. Essentially I was able to appreciate that “life goes on,” and that there is much beauty in nature and my life that would still be there, even if the disaster of Trump becoming president for 4 more years happened.

I thought about my wife whom I love so much, and our little family with our dog and cat. I could not let myself get forlorn and depressed no matter what the circumstances, and I knew that I somehow needed to find a way to deal with the horrific situation that I was so afraid of. Viktor Frankl and his logotherapy came to my mind, and the horrors that all that he experienced as a survivor in a Nazi 15) concentration camp (Frankl, 959/1985). Somehow Frankl found a way of emerging from these unspeakable horrors with still finding meaning in life. Well if Frankl could do it in the midst of the overwhelming Nazi concentration camp cruelty and death that he was continually surrounded by, then I figured that I could do it if Trump becomes president for 4 more years, even if it does result in the beginning of the extinction of our species.

At the end of the workshop we gathered back in our circle and were invited to share what we experienced during our communion with nature. I shared the basics of my experience with our group, and I believe it made quite the impression, as at the beginning of our workshop I had shared about my difficulties in accepting the stark possibility of Trump “stealing” the election. And this preliminary acceptance experience that I had in the context of self-logotherapy has essentially stayed with me during the 10 weeks that have thus far followed, and has been continually reinforced by my individual mindfulness meditation practice. Furthermore, I expanded upon this preliminary acceptance experience a few weeks later during an outdoor yoga workshop in which I internalized the core principles of self-logotherapy, as described above, to engage in what may possibly evolve for me as post-traumatic growth (Schulenberg, 2020). Essentially I came to the realization that if Trump is elected for 4 more years, then I need to stay the course and continue my Resisting Trump work, both writing/publishing articles and giving talks at humanistic psychology conferences. The world may very well come to an end sooner rather than later via Trump getting reelected as President of the United States, but I will still do all that I can to find meaning in the world for as long as I am living.

**Conclusion**

In this article the relationships between self-logotherapy, mindfulness meditation, terror management theory, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Trump presidency have been described. The conclusion is that self-logotherapy and mindfulness meditation are potentially powerful and effective 16) tools to constructively deal with the terror management consequences of both the coronavirus pandemic and the Trump presidency.

**Notes**

- See also Benjamin (2020a) and Benjamin (2020b) and the references therein for descriptions of the deadly effects of Trump’s actions and non-actions in regard to the coronavirus pandemic.
- See Benjamin (2020b), and Benjamin (2020) which includes the links to Parts 2, 3, 4, and 5 of my Deadly Duo: Trump and the Coronavirus article series, and the references therein to these articles.
- In this regard, see Egan & Baldas (2020) and Niewert (2020a) for descriptions of the plans of a militia to kidnap and possibly kill the governor of Michigan.
- See Viser et al., (2020) for a description of how Biden is strongly criticizing Trump for escalating racial violence in the United States.
For all quotes in this paragraph see Liberto et al., 2020, p. 117, and the references therein.

See Benjamin (in press) and the references therein for a description of my Resisting Trump/Humanistic Psychology work.

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