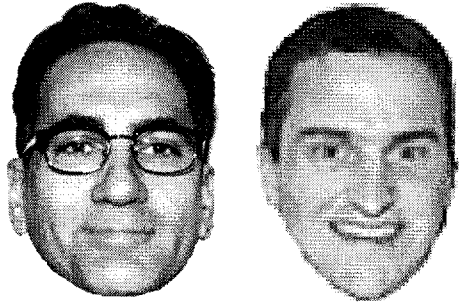


## **DISABILITY ACCEPTANCE THEORIES AND LOGOTHERAPY**

**Joseph N. Ososkie & Jared C. Schultz**

Understanding disability acceptance as an existential process allows us to consider what meaning is attached to the experience of life with a disability. In the literature on existential perspectives in the field of disability acceptance, specific concepts under consideration include self-awareness, responsibility, meaning, existential anxiety, isolation, and awareness of death.<sup>1</sup>



Logotherapy, as an existential psychiatry, can be utilized in helping individuals with disabilities deal with these same specific concepts.<sup>3</sup> For example, logotherapy has been discussed elsewhere as a way to explore values in terms of living life with a chronic illness.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the present paper is to consider theories of acceptance of disability in terms of how they are similar to key concepts of logotherapy. Personal processes such as transcendence and one's attitude toward life with a disability or chronic illness are discussed. Of particular importance is the meaning attached to living life with a disability.

### **Disability Acceptance**

Whether the disability is of a chronic or progressive nature, or whether it has early or later onset in the person's life, life with a disability presents issues of freedom, isolation, anxiety, meaning, and death for the individual. Facing death or escaping an early death, for example, places this specific existential conflict at the forefront of the person's life. Facing stigma, due to the populace's own existential or aesthetic anxiety regarding their concerns about disability, demands that isolation and aloneness be confronted in the life of the person who has the disability.<sup>4,5</sup> A sense of a loss of freedom due to dependence because of a physical disability may be experienced. "What will be done to us, when we are in a state of mental, emotional, social, or physical helplessness?"<sup>6, p.36</sup> The

experience of disability certainly demands that we examine our being in the world.

Theories of acceptance of disability typically explain the process and offer the opportunity for movement beyond the apparent limits of the disability. Opportunities for psychological and even spiritual growth open up for individuals as a result of being presented with a disability. The experience of life with a disability affords individuals opportunities to consider their attitudes toward their life and to find meaning in the experience.

Personal values have a significant role in both Somatopsychology and Stigma Incorporation theories. The fact of the disease, illness, or injury precipitates contemplation of its place within the existence of the individual who has the disability. Tragedy, adversity, or even inconvenience that results from the experience of disability cannot be denied. The individual with a disability is in essence forced to face the life changing and challenging aspects of illness and disease.

Somatopsychology, described by Wright, recognizes that the individual with a disability must interact with persons who may be distracted by their misunderstanding of the disability and guided by stereotyping to never see beyond the disability and directly to the person.<sup>12,13</sup> The person with the disability is thus impacted; changes in physique effect the person psychologically. Characteristics that define the process of disability adjustment include: containing disability effects, subordinating the emphasis on physique, enlarging the scope of awareness of values, and moving emphasis from comparative to personal asset values. In fact, Livneh and Sherwood, in describing Somatopsychology, speak of the "personal meaning of the disability."<sup>8</sup>  
p.536

Additionally, self-concept changes are theorized as critical for individual movement from stigma isolation through stigma incorporation for DeLoach and Greer in Stigma Incorporation Theory. Isolating, recognizing, and then incorporating the stigmatizing aspects of the disability allows an individual to move beyond disability-related stigma.<sup>2</sup>

The theory of Disability Transcendence acknowledges the stigmatizing aspects of disability as well as the opportunities to rise above them.<sup>10</sup> In essence, disability provides the opportunity for a growth experience. Vash defines three levels of acknowledgement on the part of the person who has a disability: (a) recognition of the facts of the disability where the disability is viewed as a tragedy that holds negative valence, (b) acceptance of the implications of the disability where the disability is viewed as an inconvenience that holds neutral valence, and (c) embracing of the experience where the disability is viewed as an opportunity that holds positive valence. Transcendence of disability is

described in a manner that places the disability in the background in terms of the person's attitude toward having a disability.

Logotherapy recognizes the individual's ability to see beyond tragedy and find opportunity, where self-transcendence and self-distancing are paramount considerations. This movement on the part of the person who has a disability is characterized in logotherapy as reaching into the noetic dimension in order to transcend the stigmatizing and handicapping aspects of life with a disability. Disabling facts must not be denied, and the person must be free to choose how to live life with a disability. In fact, the individual is responsible to decide what life will be like, and what attitude to take in reference to life with a disability.

In Vash's theory of Disability Transcendence, psychospiritual growth ensues after experiencing adversity and then transcending it.<sup>11</sup> The possibilities are far reaching for persons who are able to turn adversity into opportunity. What is first viewed as tragedy is later viewed as that which truly and meaningfully changed one's life. What first seemed to take everything from life gives back more than was thought possible prior to it. A higher level of understanding is reached and a spiritual recognition is gained. Moving forward is accomplished by examining attitudes toward adversity and by expanding life perspective. In fact, looking outside of self is recommended as an effective beginning prescription. Vash clearly admonishes that, in regards to understanding adversity, Frankl is the theorist to study.

Levers and Maki consider transcendence upon confronting adversity in their investigation of African healing practices and their philosophy of Ethnorehabilitation. "The person transcends the adversity by undergoing the process of becoming a healer and healing others – a process that has a spiritual link to its larger cultural context."<sup>7, p.138</sup> Again, the value and importance of self-transcendence is evident. Adversity presents both conflict and a chance for movement beyond the conflict. It presents a chance for reaching out to others, and this has healing properties. Transcendence can ensue only after facing pain and then following one's life path.

Acceptance of disability requires living in the present, self-awareness, self-transcendence, and finding meaning in life. Finding meaning in the experience of life with a disability, disease, or chronic illness is crucial in furthering our understanding of the impact of such experiences on a person's life. Vash states "The major activity of all human beings is to extract meaning from their encounters with the world."<sup>11, p.209</sup>

## Finding Meaning

One's existence in the world, or being present in the world, is what is of importance. Interaction with those in one's world matters in terms of search for purpose and meaning. Withdrawal and isolation will not further this exploration of the individual with a disability. The answer to, "What do I do with my life with a disability?" becomes clearer through a thorough consideration of the question. This question must be asked; it cannot be avoided. The phenomenological characteristic of finding meaning is paramount in disability. The meaning that the individual who has the disability attaches is critical. Imposing meaning by others or introjections of imposed meaning does not equal responsible living.

Finding meaning is a dynamic process. This is especially obvious for a person who has a progressive disability. An individual's life circumstances change in relation to interactions with those in the person's world. This is the reason why the perspective of present awareness is important. As the present is attended to, the past loses its previously held significance. What matters is the present and a sense of the possibilities for what lies ahead. Meaning is attached to one's life with a disability and not to the disability *per se*. Attaching meaning to the disability without consideration of the person who has the disability would suggest that the person is controlled by the disability. The person in this instance becomes the disability.<sup>12,13</sup> Choice and freedom are lost in this case.

## Counseling Considerations

Finding meaning in life with a disability influences the direction of counseling. Facilitating the exploration of meaning in respect to acceptance of disability is an appropriate function for counselors. Counselors help clients approach existential questions that arise regarding the impact the disability has had in their lives.

Counselors must also understand their own existential boundary experiences when assisting clients in their search for meaning in life with a disability. In fact, Ososkie previously defined logotherapeutic rehabilitation counseling to draw attention to this particular facet of understanding life with a disability for those involved in clinical rehabilitation services.<sup>9</sup> He noted that in rehabilitation counselor supervision, supervisor and supervisee must pay attention to their own issues related to disability in order that effective counseling is provided. Otherwise, the counselor may hinder growth and meaning exploration on the part of the client. The client may be prepared to look at life beyond the disability but the counselor may not have transcended the disability in order to be able to see who the person is who has the disability.

Attention to suffering related to the disability is an important clinical consideration. Frankl's Dereflection becomes available with the realization of the experiential nature of the disability. Avoidance is not recommended, nor is pity. The limiting features and characteristics of the disability must be dealt with, but counselors help clients tap into their self-transcendent capacities so that they can move beyond their disabilities. Personal development results by facilitating attention to the noetic dimension.

Counselors facilitate personal interaction and help their clients combat personal isolation. Helping clients make decisions to return to families and careers, and helping them see alternatives, are regular functions of counselors. Concentrating some of their efforts on their client's awareness of the meaning that can be found in their everyday lives with a disability is a significant role for counselors.

### **Conclusion**

Counselors of persons with disabilities must attend to existential concepts that include freedom, choice, and meaning. Ignoring these human qualities is contrary to effective clinical practice. The phenomenological aspect of the client must be respected at all times.

The counselor too must gain more personal and professional awareness in order to foster clinical exploration on the part of the client. Awareness of the difficult aspects of life as well as of the satisfying aspects of life is necessary within the framework of the counseling relationship. The counselor must not make all of the decisions for the client because of an attitude that indicates that those who have severe disabilities are helpless. The counselor must not have a caretaker personality that removes the discussion of loss from the client-counselor relationship in an attempt to make the client comfortable.

Logotherapy has an overriding existential philosophy that is consistent with theories of disability acceptance. Concepts such as self-distancing and self-transcendence allow the client who has a disability access to the noetic dimension. Logotherapy can be helpful to counselors of persons with disabilities through its insistence that life has meaning under all circumstances, including facing life with suffering and disability.

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