

Burnout as Existential Crisis: Integrating Logotherapeutic and Empirical Perspectives on Meaning Loss

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ABSTRACT

Burnout is among the most extensively documented occupational health phenomena of the early twenty-first century, yet dominant clinical and organizational frameworks have persistently framed it as a product of excessive workload and insufficient recovery. This article argues that such accounts remain structurally incomplete. Drawing on Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and existential analysis, alongside contemporary meaning research, the article develops the thesis that burnout is not primarily an energy deficit but an existential one: the progressive erosion of perceived meaning in one's work and, ultimately, in one's life. A systematic integration of classical burnout theory (Maslach et al., 2001), Frankl's concept of existential frustration (1963), Antonovsky's sense of coherence (1987), and empirical findings from Steger's meaning-in-life research (2009) reveals significant convergences. The triad of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment maps onto a deeper structure of meaninglessness, disconnection, and self-alienation that logotherapy has long described. Practical implications for logotherapeutic interventions, purpose-driven leadership, and biographical meaning work are discussed. The article concludes that an existential reframing of burnout is not merely a theoretical enrichment but a clinical and preventive necessity.

KEYWORDS: *burnout, meaning in life, logotherapy, existential analysis, existential frustration, Viktor Frankl, sense of coherence, work motivation*

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RECEIVED
22 Mar 2026

REVISED
21 Apr 2026

ACCEPTED
11 May 2026

PUBLISHED
26 May 2026

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Sora Pazer. Burnout as Existential Crisis: Integrating Logotherapeutic and Empirical Perspectives on Meaning Loss. *World Wide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 2026; 12(05): 20-27.

1. Introduction

In 2019, the World Health Organization formally classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), describing it as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (WHO, 2019). This classification reflects decades of growing clinical concern and organizational research. By most contemporary accounts, burnout is understood as an energetic problem: a person pushes too hard for too long, the reservoir empties, and collapse follows. The remedy, accordingly, is rest, workload reduction, and better self-care.

This framework is not wrong, but it is insufficient. It fails to explain a central paradox that any clinician working with burned-out individuals will recognize: many people who work comparatively little burn out, while others who work extraordinary hours do not. Workload, taken alone, does not explain burnout. Something else does. This article proposes that the missing variable is meaning. More specifically, it argues that burnout is best understood as a manifestation of existential meaning loss – the experience of laboring within a life that has ceased to feel significant, directed, or coherent. This claim is not a novel philosophical speculation. Viktor Frankl formulated its theoretical foundation in the mid-twentieth century through logotherapy and existential analysis. What has changed is the empirical scaffolding now available to support it. The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the classical burnout literature and identifies its structural limitations. Section 3 introduces Frankl's theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on existential frustration and its psychological consequences. Section 4 engages contemporary empirical meaning research. Section 5 develops the integrative argument: burnout as existential crisis. Section 6 derives practical implications. Section 7 discusses the limits of the proposed framework, and Section 8 concludes.

2. Burnout: Conceptual Foundations and Their Limits

2.1 The Classical Model

The most influential conceptualization of burnout remains that of Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson, who defined it as a three-dimensional syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion denotes the depletion of emotional resources – the subjective sense of having nothing left to give. Depersonalization describes a distancing, often cynical attitude toward the people one serves. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to the erosion of felt competence and productivity. This triad has shaped three decades of burnout research, clinical assessment (through the Maslach Burnout Inventory), and organizational intervention. Freudenberger (1974), who first introduced the term "burnout" in a clinical context, described it as the exhaustion of an individual's internal resources through excessive demands – demands, importantly, that were often self-imposed by idealistic and highly committed workers. This observation is significant: burnout does not strike the indifferent. It strikes those who care. Subsequent models elaborated on Maslach's framework. Leiter and Maslach (1988) proposed the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model, identifying an imbalance between occupational demands and available resources as the proximal cause. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) developed this model further, demonstrating that burnout arises when high demands are persistently paired with insufficient resources – not only material resources, but psychological ones including social support, autonomy, and feedback.

2.2 The Explanatory Gap

Despite its empirical productivity, the dominant stress-resource framework exhibits a fundamental explanatory gap. It accounts for when burnout becomes likely (high demands, low resources) but not for why otherwise resourced and intelligent individuals fail to withdraw from situations that are clearly depleting them, and why recovery of energy does not consistently produce recovery of engagement. The key insight lies in Freudenberger's original observation. People who burn out were once, characteristically, deeply committed. They believed in what they were doing. Burnout is, in this light, not the failure of endurance but the failure of meaning. The exhaustion is real, but it follows from something prior: the collapse of the inner justification for continuing. Leiter and Maslach (2004) themselves acknowledged this dimension when they described the erosion of engagement as central to burnout – engagement understood not merely as energy investment but as a sense of significance and belonging. Yet this acknowledgment has rarely been pursued at the theoretical level it deserves. The field has continued to optimize job demands and resource allocation while leaving the deeper question – what makes work worth sustaining? – largely unaddressed.

3. Viktor Frankl and the Logic of Existential Frustration

3.1 The Will to Meaning

Viktor Frankl developed logotherapy and existential analysis as a response to what he identified as the defining pathology of the modern era: the existential vacuum (Frankl, 1963). Against Freud's pleasure principle and Adler's will to power, Frankl posited a will to meaning as the primary motivational force in human life. Human beings are not primarily seeking pleasure or social dominance; they are seeking a reason to

exist, to act, to endure. This claim is not merely philosophical. Frankl grounded it in clinical observation accumulated before, during, and after his imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. The individuals who survived psychologically, he argued, were those who maintained a sense of meaning — a future toward which they oriented themselves, a task that awaited completion, a person for whom they remained responsible. Meaninglessness, conversely, produced what Frankl termed noogenic neurosis: psychopathology originating not in drives or interpersonal trauma but in the frustration of the will to meaning.

Existential frustration is the condition in which an individual cannot discover or create adequate meaning for their existence (Frankl, 1963, 1969). Existential frustration manifests phenomenologically as a sense of emptiness, purposelessness, and the question why bother? — a question that, when unanswered, corrodes motivation from within. Frankl distinguished between suffering for something and suffering without purpose. Meaningful suffering can be endured; meaningless suffering cannot. This distinction has direct clinical relevance for burnout: a worker who experiences extreme pressure but understands it as serving a valued purpose is fundamentally in a different existential position from one who experiences moderate pressure without any sense of why it matters.

Frankl introduced the noological dimension — the realm of meanings, values, and responsibilities — as a distinct level of human existence not reducible to biological or psychological processes (Frankl, 1969). Psychotherapy, he argued, must engage this dimension directly when noogenic dysfunction is present. Symptom reduction alone is insufficient: if the symptoms arise from meaninglessness, their alleviation leaves the underlying vacuum intact. This is precisely the limitation of purely stress-reduction approaches to burnout. When a burned-out individual takes leave, reduces workload, and improves sleep hygiene, they may restore energy — but if the work to which they return remains fundamentally meaningless to them, the burnout will recur. Energy is a resource; meaning is a foundation. The two operate at different levels.

4. Empirical Meaning Research: Converging Evidence

4.1 Meaning in Life as a Measurable Construct

Contemporary meaning research has moved considerably beyond the philosophical and clinical intuitions of Frankl to establish meaning in life as an empirically tractable and measurable construct. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) developed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which distinguishes between the presence of meaning (the degree to which one currently experiences life as meaningful) and the search for meaning (the degree to which one is actively seeking meaning). Both components have been extensively studied in relation to psychological well-being, stress resilience, and occupational functioning. Presence of meaning consistently predicts psychological well-being, positive affect, life satisfaction, and lower rates of depression and anxiety (Steger et al., 2006; Steger, 2009). Crucially for the present argument, absence of meaning predicts outcomes that overlap substantially with the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, disengagement, reduced sense of efficacy, and interpersonal withdrawal.

4.2 Meaning as a Buffer Against Stress

A robust body of empirical evidence supports the role of meaning as a stress buffer. Zika and Chamberlain (1992) demonstrated that sense of meaning accounted for a significant portion of variance in psychological well-being independent of stressful life events. Debats (1999) showed that individuals high in experienced meaning exhibited greater resilience under conditions of adversity. More recently, meta-analytic work by Czekierda, Banik, Park, and Luszczynska (2017) confirmed that meaning in life is inversely associated with burnout symptoms across multiple occupational groups, with particular strength in helping professions. The mechanism appears to operate through multiple pathways. Meaning sustains goal commitment under adversity (Emmons, 2005), reduces the experience of threat appraisal in stressful situations (Park, 2005), and maintains the sense of personal agency and efficacy that Maslach identified as a protective factor against burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). When meaning is present, demands are experienced within a broader framework that renders them tolerable and, often, affirming. When meaning is absent, even moderate demands register as excessive because they cannot be justified by any larger purpose.

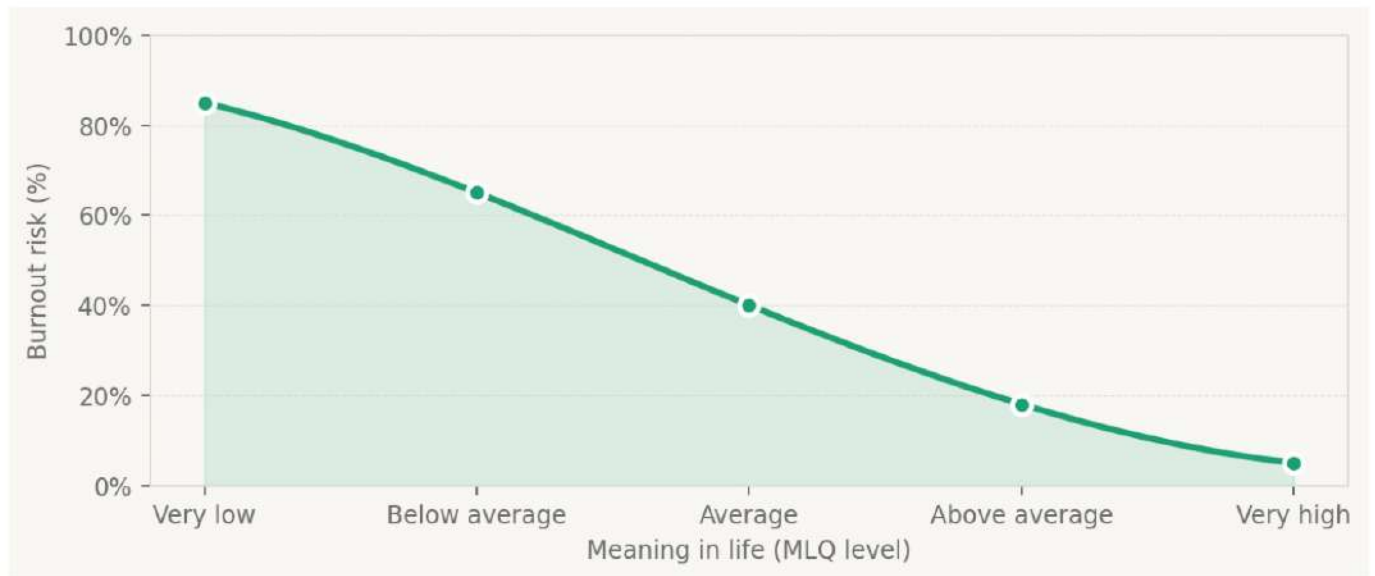


Figure 3. Inverse relationship between meaning-in-life level (MLQ) and burnout risk. As presence of meaning increases across the MLQ spectrum, estimated burnout probability decreases substantially, from approximately 85% at the lowest meaning levels to 5% at the highest. Note. Conceptual model based on Steger (2009) and Czekierda et al. (2017).

4.3 Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence

Aaron Antonovsky's salutogenic framework offers a complementary formalization of these dynamics. Antonovsky (1987) proposed that health is sustained by a generalized orientation he termed the sense of coherence (SOC): the degree to which one perceives one's world as comprehensible (cognitively manageable), manageable (resourced), and meaningful (worth investing in). The third component — meaningfulness — Antonovsky regarded as the most critical: without a sense that demands are worth engaging, comprehensibility and manageability offer insufficient protection. Burnout, in Antonovsky's terms, represents the collapse of the meaningfulness component, which then undermines the entire coherence orientation. The burned-out individual does not simply lack energy; they have lost the motivational foundation that would make energy expenditure rational. This is why burnout characteristically affects not the cynical or uncommitted but those who were once the most engaged.

4.4 Keyes and the Languishing Paradigm

Corey Keyes' distinction between flourishing and languishing adds a further dimension (Keyes, 2002). Languishing — a state of emotional flatness, emptiness, and diminished vitality — is not equivalent to clinical depression but represents a failure of positive mental health. Keyes' empirical work demonstrated that languishing is associated with significant functional impairment and high absenteeism, and that it predicts elevated risk of developing full depressive episodes. The phenomenological parallels between languishing and burnout are striking. Both involve a withdrawal of positive engagement, a sense of going through the motions, and a reduction in the experience of life as meaningful or worthwhile. Burnout, particularly in its advanced phases, may be understood as occupationally-contextualized languishing driven by prolonged existential frustration.

5. Burnout as Existential Crisis: An Integrative Framework

5.1 Mapping the Burnout Triad onto Existential Dynamics

The integrative argument of this article can be stated directly: the three dimensions of the Maslach burnout model — emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment — correspond to three distinct manifestations of existential meaning loss, and the causal logic runs from meaning loss to the burnout triad, not merely in parallel with it.

Emotional exhaustion is not simply the consequence of too many demands. It is, more precisely, the consequence of demands experienced as unworthy of the energy they require. When a person can answer why they are doing what they are doing — when the work connects to valued purposes, to a future worth building, to a self worth developing — they access what might be termed existential endurance: the capacity to sustain effort through fatigue because the effort carries meaning. Without this, exhaustion sets in earlier, recovers more slowly, and is not amenable to resolution through rest alone. Depersonalization — the cynical distancing from those one serves — is intelligible as a defensive

response to existential emptiness. When work loses meaning, continued relational investment becomes psychologically threatening. The cynicism of the burned-out professional is not a personality failure; it is an adaptive withdrawal from relationships that once carried meaning and now represent reminders of its loss.

Reduced personal accomplishment maps onto the collapse of what Frankl termed the categorical imperative of logotherapy: the recognition that one's actions are irreplaceable and that one bears unique responsibility for what one does or fails to do (Frankl, 1963). When meaning erodes, so does the experience of agency. The burned-out individual does not merely perform less well; they cease to experience their actions as genuinely their own or genuinely significant.

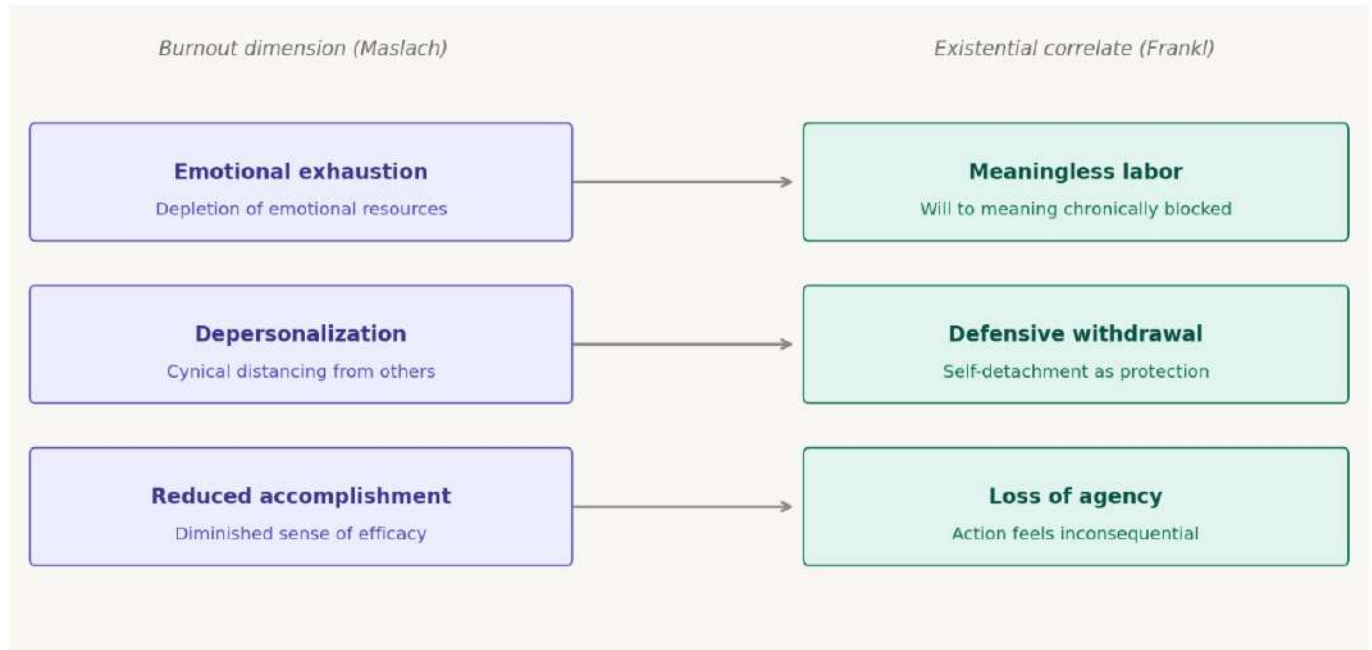


Figure 1. Structural correspondence between Maslach's burnout triad (left) and existential correlates in Frankl's logotherapy (right). Each burnout dimension is reinterpreted as a manifestation of existential meaning loss. The causal logic runs from right to left: meaning deprivation produces the burnout syndrome.

5.2 The Chronicity Problem

One of the most clinically significant features of burnout is its chronicity. Unlike acute stress responses, burnout develops slowly and persists even when external stressors are reduced. This chronicity is difficult to explain within a purely energetic model – if burnout is essentially energy depletion, adequate rest should produce recovery. The clinical reality is more complicated. An existential framework explains chronicity straightforwardly. Meaning loss, once established, does not self-correct through rest. The individual returns to work with restored energy but unchanged orientation. The questions that went unanswered before the leave – why does this matter? what am I working toward? who am I in this role? – remain unanswered. The burnout accordingly recurs, often more rapidly than the first episode.

5.3 The Selectivity Problem

A further explanatory advantage of the meaning-based account concerns selectivity. Burnout disproportionately affects people in the helping professions – healthcare workers, teachers, social workers, clergy, therapists – and among these, those who entered their professions with the highest initial commitment (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This counterintuitive pattern has long puzzled burnout researchers. From an existential perspective, it is entirely coherent. People who invest in helping professions do so, characteristically, because those professions carry high personal meaning. The work is not merely instrumental; it is an expression of values, of vocation, of identity. When that meaning is disrupted – by institutional dysfunction, by bureaucratic demands that displace direct care – the meaning collapse is not merely occupational but biographical. The person does not simply lose interest in a job; they experience the failure of a self-defining commitment.

5.4 The Thesis Restated

The central thesis of this article can now be restated with greater precision. Burnout is not the product of excessive workload but of a chronic

and unresolved discrepancy between external action and internal meaning. What burns a person out is not working too much but working without adequate meaning — without a sense that what one does matters, contributes, or is worth the cost. Workload functions as an accelerant. Meaning loss is the fire. This restatement does not deny the importance of workload management, organizational resources, or self-care. It subordinates these factors to a more fundamental question: what makes any effort worth sustaining? Interventions that address the surface without engaging this question will, predictably, produce surface-level and temporary results.

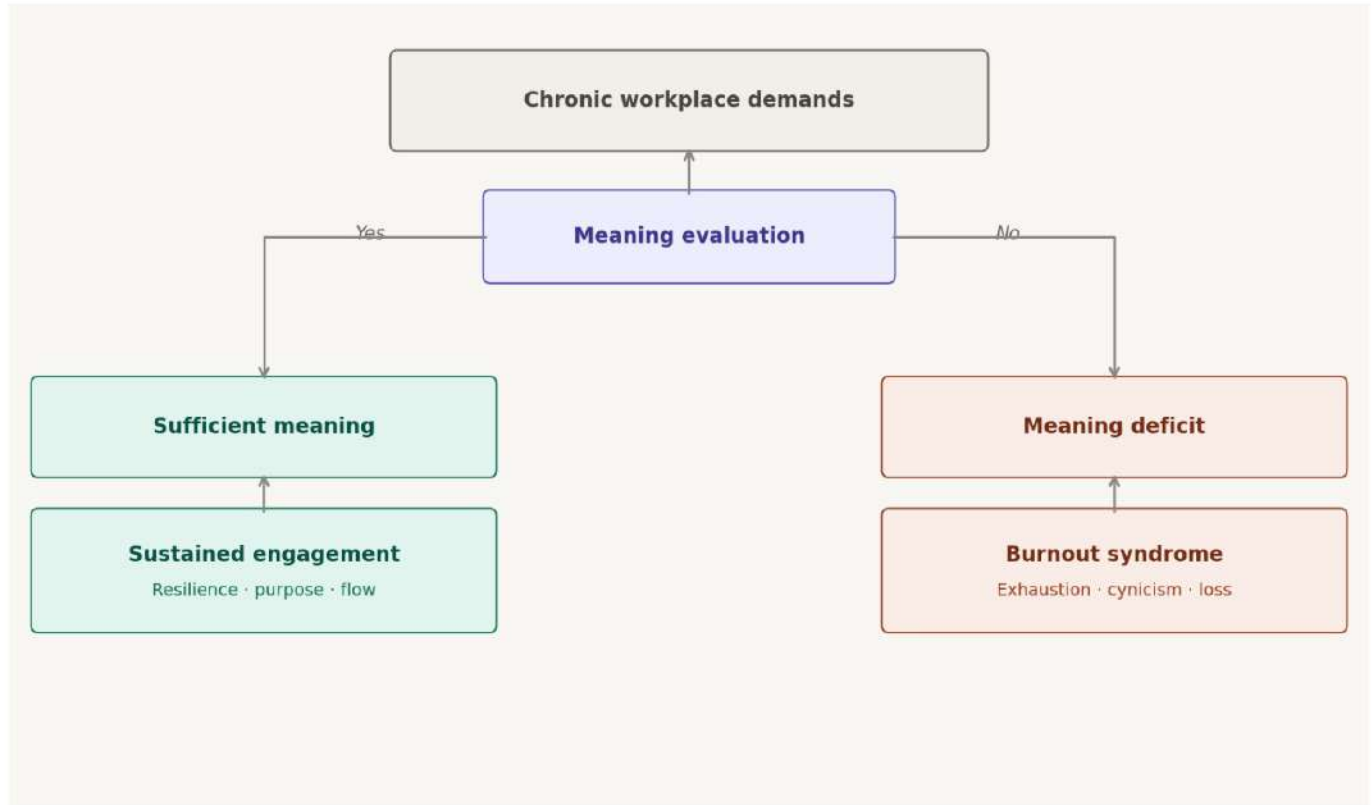


Figure 2. Meaning as mediator between chronic workplace demands and occupational outcomes. When the meaning evaluation yields sufficient perceived significance, demands produce engagement. When meaning is insufficient or absent, the same demands produce the burnout syndrome. Note. Model integrates Frankl (1963), Antonovsky (1987), and Steger (2009).

6. Practical Implications

6.1 Logotherapeutic Intervention

The most direct implication of the existential framework concerns the content of burnout treatment. Logotherapy — the psychotherapeutic method derived from Frankl's theory — offers a structured approach to the discovery and recovery of meaning (Frankl, 1963; Lukas, 1986). Its core techniques include Socratic dialogue oriented toward the articulation of personal values, dereflection (redirecting attention from symptoms to life tasks and purposes), and what Frankl termed the will to meaning as a therapeutic goal rather than a byproduct. In the context of burnout treatment, logotherapeutic work might involve systematic exploration of the following questions: What values originally drew this person to their work? What meaning did the work carry, and when did that meaning begin to erode? Are there structural changes in the working environment that have severed the connection between work and purpose, and are these reversible? Is the meaning loss localized to the occupation, or has it generalized to the person's broader life? These questions are not supplementary to clinical assessment; they are central to understanding what has happened and what recovery requires. Empirically supported approaches consistent with this framework include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which explicitly incorporates values clarification and psychological flexibility as mechanisms of change (Hayes et al., 2006), and meaning-centered therapy approaches developed for populations experiencing existential distress (Breitbart et al., 2010). Both approaches demonstrate efficacy in conditions of burnout and related presentations.

6.2 Purpose-Oriented Leadership

Organizational implications follow directly. If burnout is substantially driven by meaning loss, then organizational conditions that undermine

meaning are proximal risk factors. Research on work design consistently identifies five features associated with intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Notably, three of these five — task identity, task significance, and autonomy — bear directly on the experience of meaningful work. Organizations that prioritize efficiency at the expense of these dimensions are, in effect, manufacturing the conditions for meaning erosion. Purpose-oriented leadership has emerged as a practical organizational response. Leaders who communicate a clear and authentic organizational mission, connect individual contributions to that mission, and protect the relational and meaningful dimensions of work reduce burnout risk not by managing demands but by sustaining the meaning that makes demands tolerable (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dik & Duffy, 2009). This is not a call for corporate mission statements but for the genuine cultivation of work environments in which people can answer, when asked, why any of this matters.

6.3 Biographical Meaning Work

At the individual level, the existential account of burnout points toward a form of intervention that might be termed biographical meaning work: deliberate reflection on one's life trajectory, the values that have organized it, the commitments that constitute one's identity, and the degree to which current occupational existence is consonant with or discrepant from those commitments. This work need not take a therapeutic form. Structured mentoring, vocational counseling oriented toward Frankl's concept of calling (Berufung), philosophical journaling, and community-based meaning practices (including religious and spiritual engagement) all represent contexts in which biographical meaning can be examined and reconstructed. What matters is that the reflection is genuine — that it engages the actual questions rather than performing wellness through ritualized self-care.

7. Discussion: Limits and Critical Considerations

7.1 Not Every Burnout Is a Meaning Crisis

The argument of this article must be qualified carefully. Not every burnout presentation is primarily an existential phenomenon. Burnout can result from severe and prolonged physiological stress — sleep deprivation, chronic pain, hormonal dysregulation — in which existential factors may play a minimal role. Burnout can also result from acute traumatic exposure (as in first responders following mass casualty events) that operates through different mechanisms. The claim is not that all burnout is existential but that a substantial proportion of occupational burnout, particularly in helping and knowledge professions, involves a central and under-recognized existential dimension that current models inadequately address.

7.2 The Operationalization Challenge

A legitimate critique of Frankl's framework concerns operationalizability. Concepts such as "will to meaning," "existential vacuum," and "noogenic neurosis" are philosophically rich but have historically resisted the kind of precise operationalization that empirical psychology demands. This is not an insurmountable problem — the Meaning in Life Questionnaire and related instruments have made significant progress in this direction — but it remains a challenge. Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies examining the temporal relationship between meaning loss and burnout symptom development, clarifying whether meaning erosion precedes, accompanies, or follows the onset of the burnout syndrome. Cross-cultural studies are also needed to assess the universality of the meaning-burnout relationship, given that the cultural conditions shaping both meaning construction and occupational values vary substantially across societies.

7.3 Integration Rather Than Replacement

The existential account should be understood as deepening and complementing, rather than replacing, existing burnout frameworks. The JDR model identifies real structural conditions that matter. Biological stress research illuminates the physiological substrate of burnout in ways that are clinically important. The existential perspective adds a level of analysis that these frameworks cannot provide — one that asks not only what is happening but why it matters that it is happening to this person in this life. Adequate theory and adequate treatment require all three levels.

8. Conclusion

The argument of this article can be stated plainly. Burnout is not merely a disorder of energy management. It is, in a significant proportion of cases, a disorder of meaning — the lived consequence of laboring without adequate existential grounding. Viktor Frankl understood this intuitively from his clinical and biographical experience. Contemporary empirical research is confirming it with increasing precision. The practical stakes are high. If burnout is primarily an energy problem, the appropriate response is rest and demand reduction. If it is primarily a meaning problem, the appropriate response involves something more demanding and more human: the recovery of a reason to be here, to do this, to remain. That recovery is possible, as logotherapy has consistently demonstrated. But it requires that clinicians, organizations, and

affected individuals be willing to ask questions that current frameworks tend to suppress — questions not about workload but about purpose, not about resources but about reasons. Burnout is not the end of care. In many cases, it is the signal that the most important work — the work of meaning-making — has been neglected for too long.

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