

Meaning of life in healthy aging: contributions from Viktor Frankl's theory***Sentido da vida no envelhecimento saudável: contribuições da teoria de Viktor Frankl****Significado de la vida en el envejecimiento saludable: contribuciones de la teoría de Viktor Frankl****Recebido: 20/02/2020****Aprovado: 11/08/2020****Publicado: 14/10/2020****Rita de Cássia Nunes Alvarenga Miranda¹****Eliane Ramos Pereira²****Rose Mary Costa Rosa Andrade Silva³****Angélica Yolanda Bueno Bejarano Vale de Medeiros⁴****Fabio Araujo Dias⁵**

This study aims to reflect on the meaning of life as a strategy for healthy aging, based on the theoretical perspective of Viktor Frankl. It is a reflective essay based on the premise of healthy aging and the need to contextualize professional practice in health, enabling new perspectives for intervention based on the Frankian theory. Through a review of the *Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde* and its databases, materials produced between 2013 and 2019 were sought, which provided enough data for the proposed theme. Thirty publications were considered and three categories were constructed: *Anthropological perspective in Viktor Frankl*; *The meaning of life in aging and healthy aging*; and *The meaning of family living values in healthy aging*. One of the current challenges is for the population to age with quality of life while maintaining its functional capacity preserved. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the contribution of the meaning of life as a strategy to strengthen the existential dimension of the elderly during their aging process with a view to the important implications for their mental health and longevity, since it directly interferes in all their way of life.

Descriptor: Healthy aging; Aged; Spirituality; Existentialism

Este estudo tem como o objetivo refletir sobre o sentido da vida como estratégia para o envelhecimento saudável, com base na perspectiva teórica de Viktor Frankl. Trata-se de um ensaio reflexivo a partir da premissa de envelhecimento saudável e da necessidade de contextualização da prática profissional em saúde, possibilitando novas perspectivas de intervenção calcadas na teoria frankliana. Através de revisão na Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde e suas bases de dados, buscou-se materiais entre 2013 a 2019, que forneceram subsídios para o tema proposto. Considerou-se 30 publicações e construiu-se três categorias: *Perspectiva antropológica em Viktor Frankl*; *O sentido da vida no envelhecer e o envelhecimento saudável*; e, *O sentido dos valores vivenciais familiares no envelhecimento saudável*. Um dos desafios atuais é que a população envelheça com qualidade de vida mantendo sua capacidade funcional preservada. Portanto, há que se atentar para o aporte do sentido da vida como estratégia de fortalecimento da dimensão existencial do idoso durante o seu processo de envelhecimento com vistas as importantes implicações na sua saúde mental e longevidade, já que interfere diretamente em toda a sua maneira de viver.

Descritores: Envelhecimento saudável; Idoso; Espiritualidade; Existencialismo.

Este estudio tiene como objetivo reflexionar acerca del significado de la vida como estrategia para un envejecimiento saludable, basado en la perspectiva teórica de Viktor Frankl. Es un ensayo reflexivo a partir de la premisa del envejecimiento saludable y la necesidad de contextualizar la práctica profesional en salud, posibilitando nuevas perspectivas de intervención basadas en la teoría frankliana. Mediante una revisión en la Biblioteca Virtual de Salud y sus bases de datos, se buscaron materiales entre 2013 y 2019, que proporcionaron subsidios para el tema propuesto. Fueron consideradas 30 publicaciones y se construyó tres categorías: *Perspectiva antropológica en Viktor Frankl*; *El significado de la vida en el envejecimiento y el envejecimiento saludable*; y *El significado de los valores de la experiencia familiar en el envejecimiento saludable*. Uno de los retos actuales es que la población envejezca con calidad de vida manteniendo su capacidad funcional. Por lo tanto, es necesario observar la contribución del significado de la vida como estrategia para fortalecer la dimensión existencial de los ancianos durante su proceso de envejecimiento, en vista de las importantes implicaciones para su salud mental y su longevidad, ya que interfiere directamente con toda su forma de vida.

Descriptores: Envejecimiento saludable, Anciano; Espiritualidad; Existencialismo.

* This study was funded by the *Coordination for the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - CAPES* (Improvement of Higher Education Personnel).

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, the number of people aged 65 and over is increasing in developing countries. In Brazil, the number of people aged 60 and over, surpassed the mark of 30.2 million in 2017, which means an increase of 18% of this population since 2012. The care for this many people becomes a challenge not only for the family, but also in social environments and even for institutionalization houses aimed at elderly people¹.

Aging is a set of physiological and biopsychosocial changes, common to all human beings. In addition to biological processes, aging includes the spiritual part of human beings². It is a multifactorial phenomenon, associated with the decline in physiological and cellular functions, the increase in the incidence of numerous degenerative diseases and the decrease in the ability to respond to processes such as stress, among others. However, it can be counterbalanced by repair and maintenance factors, which contribute to the organism's longevity³.

The World Health Organization (WHO) foresees healthy aging as the main focus of global health actions for the decade of 2020-2030⁴. According to WHO, healthy aging consists of the process of developing and maintaining functional capacity that allows for well-being in old age. In this sense, actions to promote healthy aging should seek to maximize functional capacity in different areas⁵.

The phenomenon of longevity, initially more obvious in developed countries, has also been occurring in developing countries, demonstrating that advances in several areas have contributed to higher quality and longer life⁶, especially in health care. Nevertheless, it constitutes a challenge for public health and professionals working with these people. It is noteworthy that the promotion of quality of life can reduce or delay impacts of transformations and deleterious biological factors in the aging process⁷.

The elderly should be perceived and valued as social and autonomous subjects, with the ability to make decisions, and they should also be cognitively stimulated to preserve and improve this aspect⁸. In addition, the direct confrontation of the commodification of care, social protection and implementation of adequate structures in long-term care facilities for the elderly can be considered as challenges in the advancement of decent care⁹.

Caregivers of the elderly also need to pay attention to their physical and mental health, given that they are agents of promotion, protection and recovery of themselves and of the residents in long-term care facilities for the elderly (LTCF), for whom they provide care. Therefore, it is necessary to raise the awareness of these professionals and promote actions at an institutional level that guarantee this right¹⁰. This concern with physical and mental health is also valid for family members who take care of elderly relatives.

The elderly usually resort to LTCF because of loss of autonomy, onset of illness, lack of company and care. Even so, the elderly should be considered as social actors who are able to reconstruct and refine their existence and envision new possibilities and paths, despite being institutionalized, living with limitations caused by physical fragility and suffering losses in several aspects of life. Faced with this scenario, the elderly must be recognized in their possible autonomy and the institution must offer support for the development of elderly people's potential, capacities and skills, allowing the construction of new attributions and identities in this peculiar phase of life¹¹.

Considering this scenario, aging leads to a tendency to seek answers to existential questions about the meaning of life, which rescues reflections in the elderly about adverse situations sometimes experienced throughout life, in the original search for an existential meaning for their human condition, including to continue living.

The problem of meaning takes on all its radicality and can bring a person down and cause or prolong a depressive situation triggered by the perception that life has no more meaning, causing the existential void through hopelessness, apathy, boredom^{12,13}, or even suicide.

The neurologist Victor Frankl began his investigations on the Meaning of Life at the time of the economic crisis caused by the First World War, which led to a significant amount of

suicides, for which he undertook studies related to the confrontation of psychological conflicts and prevention of suicide¹⁴. Studies on the relationship between the meaning of life and depression point out that conceptions of the meaning of life should be included in health promotion programs, favoring the individual in finding reasons for living based on the values and internal standards of the individuals themselves. The realization of meaning is a protective factor for depressive disorders¹⁵.

Currently, several studies are being developed in the health area that work with the meaning of life as a coping strategy, and they highlight some of its benefits: such as the improvement in quality of life and better psychological adjustments and constitute a form of holistic care¹⁶.

Given the above, this study aims to reflect on the meaning of life as a strategy for healthy aging, based on the theoretical perspective of Viktor Frankl.

METHOD

This is a descriptive and reflective study, carried out in the second half of the year of 2019, which is based on exploratory bibliographic research through academic texts in the *Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde - BVS* (Virtual Health Library) in the bases: LILACS, LILACS – Express, Index Psicologia – Periódicos Técnico Científicos, RHS, BDENF-Enfermagem, BRISA and CVSP-Brasil, from 2013 to 2019, which presented data for the academic approach and reflection of the proposed theme.

The descriptors used to perform the search were: a) *Depressão, Sentido da Vida* (Depression, Meaning of Life); b) *Depressão, Sentido da Vida, Idoso* (Depression, Meaning of Life, Elderly); c) Depression, Sense of Life, Aged, all in accordance with the proposed theme. The materials were pre-selected according to titles and abstracts, with the following criteria: studies related to the theme of the elderly, depression, meaning of life, and studies that cited other issues were excluded. Studies in which the title and abstract provided sufficient information were read in full.

RESULTS

Through the BVS, LILACS, LILACS - Express, Index Psicologia – Periódicos Técnico Científicos, RHS, BDENF-Enfermagem, BRISA and CVSP-Brasil were searched, initially reaching a total of 30 articles by July of 2019. Those that were not in accordance with the inclusion criteria were eliminated, even if they contained the descriptors. Some studies used descriptors selected for this survey, but were not related to the proposed theme.

Analyzing the predominance of descriptors, including repeated documents, there was a concentration on "*depressão, sentido da vida*" (30), followed by "*depressão, sentido da vida e idoso*" (08) and in a smaller number for "*depression, sense of life, aged*" (03). As it is described in Table 1.

As a result of the reflections, after reading the texts, three categories were elaborated: *Anthropological perspective in Viktor Frankl*; *The meaning of life in aging and healthy aging*; and *The meaning of family living values in healthy aging*.

Table 1. Number of articles by descriptors and bases. Rio de Janeiro, 2019.

	Database	A	B	C
BVS	LILACS	16	03	02
	LILACS-Express	02	01	0
	Index Psicologia - Periódicos técnico-científicos	08	02	0
	RHS	01	0	0
	BDENF – Enfermagem	02	01	01
	BRISA	01	0	0
	CVSP – Brasil	0	01	0

A= *Depressão, Sentido da Vida*; B= *Depressão, Sentido da Vida, Idoso*; C= *Depression, Sense of Life, Aged*

DISCUSSION

Anthropological perspective in Viktor Frankl

Since ancient times, man has faced a constant question about the true meaning of life, which seems to stem from a deep dissatisfaction arising from the most intimate part of each being, constituting what existentialism names existential anxiety, inherent to human beings¹⁸.

Viktor Frankl's theory, called Logotherapy, has as its central theme the meaning of life. This points to a person's search for freedom of meaning, even in adverse situations, showing that they must develop their existence from a sense that attracts them, providing motivational subsidies to continue living day after day, dealing with daily situations and possible unusual questions that arise in life. The search for the meaning of life is inherent and peculiar to human beings in any situation in which they find themselves. Even when sick or close to death, life will always offer new possibilities for positioning and actions in the face of various situations, which is a fundamental requirement for mental health as a primary factor for existence¹⁹.

Viktor Frankl's anthropological vision comprises the multidimensional man, who has biopsychosocial and spiritual dimensions, the latter considered the most human in existence. This points to inner freedom and personal value. The author indicates that "*the spiritual freedom of the human being, which cannot be taken away, allows them until the last breath to configure their life in a way that makes sense*"²⁰.

Thus, the Franklian conception highlights man as a spiritual being. This anthropological fact would highlight humans among all other beings in nature since, besides affective impulse, associative memory and practical intelligence, human beings would present something qualitatively different from any other being in nature - the spiritual aspect. This spiritual factor highlights a person's ability to transcend and give meaning to life in their existential freedom¹².

In this perspective, seeking and assigning meaning to human existence understands a central need of humans in their existential trajectory. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), in his theory, approaches this concept of the meaning of life as essential, taking as an example his own experience in the Nazi concentration camps¹⁸.

According to Frankl, there are three ways to unveil the meaning of life through the realization of values: a) Creation: related to everything that a person can give; b) Experiences: what a person receives in the world and experiences; and c) Attitude, referring to a person who has an adverse situation or inevitable suffering¹⁸⁻²⁰.

The meaning of life in aging and healthy aging

Aging is a natural process that starts from the moment we are born, but it becomes more evident in old age. The quality of aging is directly linked to lifestyle adopted by the individual until this stage²¹.

With the extension of the life cycle, scientists are increasingly focusing their attention on the human body over time. Care for body and health are necessary from an early age and, throughout life, a factor that can lead to aging with more quality and less pain³.

The beginning of senescence, a period marked by evident body declines, happens to everyone, some more, others less, according to the lifestyle that this elderly person lived, considering factors such as: genetics, food, physical exercises, family, social and professional life.

Genes have strong control over the life cycle and patterns of aging. However, genetics alone cannot explain everything that happens to humans. Genetic and biological factors, as well as environmental, social and behavioral factors are interrelated throughout human life³.

A person's psychological development will largely depend on how they relate to the society in which they live, with possibilities for changes and behavioral changes that can be of great value in the final results of their own health. For this, a life of flexibility, openness to new things and possibilities is also necessary.

Chronological age is not the only way to measure the aging process, as this is an interaction of factors that influence various changes in the individual over time. Illnesses or some weakness can aggravate the perception of aging of a person or of those around them²¹.

Thus, the aging process varies from individual to individual, as people experience this cycle in different ways. The existential perspective itself characterizes each one as a unique being in the world. In addition to losses and limitations that can occur during this process, old age is seen by many as a phase of greater maturity and experience. However, aging can be accompanied by feelings of sadness, loneliness, abandonment, dependence and disabilities in such a way that the elderly person or their family member realizes the need for therapeutic follow-up and specialized gerontological care, in order to meet health needs at this stage of life²¹.

The logotherapy concept focuses on the search and encounter in the sense of life, and this occurs dynamically throughout life. It emphasizes the importance of the spiritual dimension, since it helps the person find the meaning for their own life even in the midst of adversities¹²⁻¹⁹. Thus, if there is a search for the meaning of being embraced by simplicity, gratitude and positive attitudes, aging can be a process experienced in a serene and wise way in face of the certainty of the finitude of life and despite vicissitudes and unpleasant elements that contingencies and circumstances can bring.

For healthy aging, it is necessary to envision integration of people in their biological, psychological, spiritual, or noological dimensions according to principles of Logotherapy¹². It should be noted that spirituality has aroused increasing applicability in health care, and which interest has always existed throughout human history, despite different times or cultures.

The development of the individual's spiritual dimension by themselves, in a free and meaningful way, as a way of adapting to stress in a health context, can be extremely beneficial, especially when the individual feels alone, which allows them to transcend extremely difficult situations. difficult and suffering.

For Frankl²², the human being can have a full life, regardless of age and even in a deteriorated environment, if they learns to transcend their own problems, that is, to look up, in any and all situations.

According to Frankl's assumptions, the path to the encounter with the meaning of life includes the development of values of creation, experience and attitudes and, in this aspect, the values of creation in healthy aging could be contextualized to all works that the elderly person has developed throughout their existence, and as these works will resonate even after their departure, they become a legacy for future generations.

About values of experience that cover all experiences along the path of existence, the marks in memory are the ones that bring significant recollections and contribute to the understanding of a life with purpose and a task accomplished.

Regarding attitude values, these can be dazzled even though physical strength is lacking and health deterioration is imminent. There is a spiritual dimension that does not get sick or get old and allows positive attitudes to be taken in the face of adversity at the end of life.

The meaning of family living values in healthy aging

Aging is an important stage in human life that requires special care and specific attention. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink not only about aging with quality, but also experiencing the realization of the meaning of life through a quality coexistence with family and friends, valuing with satisfaction the moments experienced.

A good quality of life is related to environmental factors, with bonds formed throughout life, especially family bonds. The support and affectionate presence of family is very important in relation to the elderly, whether at home, in hospitals or even in the LTCF, as genuine love is the only ingredient capable of making changes for the better and giving the true flavor to interpersonal relationships, making it the most fraternal, understanding and harmonious²³.

In terms of temporality, finitude and transience, all things go through a process of degeneration, suffering the actions of time, and that is also the case with human beings. The awareness of the biopsychosocial and spiritual nature of this process sometimes seeks to transcend, especially in moments of loneliness⁷, that is, it seeks to blaze thoughts beyond temporal and situational circumstances in which they live, even in moments when their own family does not meet or perceive their real needs.

People have constant needs that must be fulfilled, so life can proceed in a healthy way¹². Among such needs, there is the establishment of significant and positive family relationships. The relationship between family and elderly is something that needs to be carried out in a delicate and loving way, so that they are pleasurable moments for everyone involved.

Caring is not an isolated act, but a set of relational practices, such as affective bonds, which involve dedication and understanding in dealing with the other. In this sense, there must be a preparation for the elderly and for the family who must be aware of the challenges and peculiarities of the aging process, since this training will favor a better understanding, promotion of more effective bonds and adoption of a healthy lifestyle. according to the stage of life being experienced²³.

In view of this, it is necessary to take a position regarding attitudes that facilitate helping others, with respect to their own accumulated experiences, so that the other person themselves find their real meaning in life. When this occurs, the aging period can become a pleasant and profitable time, especially in the establishment of significant relationships and bonds at this stage of life. It is also important to have a comprehensive look and listen to the needs of the elderly on the part of family members and caregivers so that there is the possibility of more assertive help and care for these long-lived people.

Aging is part of the human process and is inevitable. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare personally for this very important phase of life, and to dedicate a time of experiences of communion and family comfort.

It is also necessary to build an environment of reciprocity, acting and contributing always, seeking to experience times of joy, with hope, giving attention to one's own family, seeking to go further with an expanded worldview, trying to perceive those who also need help to mutual collaboration that enriches human existence and the meaning of life in aging.

CONCLUSÃO

The theme addressed in this reflection permeates the life of the whole society, public bodies and, mainly, the healthcare area. One of the biggest challenges at the moment is aging with a better quality of life and with functional capacity preserved until the end of its existence, and for that it is necessary to work on the human being in a completely, that is, the physical, emotional, spiritual and relational aspects in everyday life, from childhood to old age.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the contribution of the meaning of life as a strategy to strengthen the existential dimension of the elderly during their aging process with a view to important implications for their mental health and longevity, since it directly interferes in all their way of life in that phase.

The study highlights importance of giving the elderly a voice, considering their wishes, desires and opinions, as well as considering their autonomy in their choices. For that, there must be resignification of relationships, awakening of families to strengthen bonds, value their elderly and offer a more attentive look at them, aiming at increasing love, affection and quality times in family, with repercussions on society, as everything starts in the family environment.

Professionals who deal with this population need to have in their practice clarity on how to deal with issues related to the elderly, who sometimes, in addition to being fragile in their physique, also find themselves with emotional and psychological fragilities and need their rights to be guaranteed .

To assist the elderly in promoting vitality, psychological work must be done to redefine the past, perceive the present and its possibilities and broaden their view of the future, carrying out an existential balance. This process can take place through individual and/or group psychotherapy or even through preventive programs, which can ascertain the meanings of life in the past, present and future for the elderly, promoting new perspectives of meaning and consequently strengthening in their self-esteem and quality of life.

Longevity allows human beings to plan their future, differently from what previous generations did. With this understanding, public policies have highlighted the positive sense of aging, the contribution of the elderly with their wealth of knowledge, skills and experience in everyday life.

Because it is a reflection and based on a theoretician, the study is limited by questions of generalization and thus suggests a confluence with other theorists and also research on the subject.

Despite this, the study sought to emphasize existential aspects of the meaning of life aimed at healthy aging, being able to contribute as a subsidy for new discussions and studies involving this theme, in addition to enabling contemporary perspectives of interventions in professional practice in different health scopes of the population in search of better quality of the process of healthy aging and specific professional practices in the scope of senility.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Rita de Cássia Nunes Alvarenga Miranda participated in the conception, collection and analysis of data, writing and revision. **Eliane Ramos Pereira** and **Fabio Araujo Dias** contributed to the conception, writing and revision. **Angélica Yolanda Bueno Bejarano Vale de Medeiros** collaborated in the writing. **Rose Mary Costa Rosa Andrade Silva** worked on writing and reviewing.

How to cite this article (Vancouver)

Miranda RCNA, Pereira ER, Silva RMCRA, Medeiros AYBBV, Dias FA. Meaning of life in healthy aging: contributions from Viktor Frankl's theory. REFACS [Internet]. 2020 [cited in *insert day, month and year of access*]; 8(4):943-951. Available from: *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

How to cite this article (ABNT)

MIRANDA, R. C. N. A.; PEREIRA, E. R.; SILVA, R. M. C. R. A.; MEDEIROS, A. Y. B. B. V.; DIAS, F. A. Meaning of life in healthy aging: contributions from Viktor Frankl's theory. REFACS, Uberaba, MG, v. 8, n. 4, p. 943-951, 2020. Available from: *insert access link*. Access in: *insert day, month and year of access*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

How to cite this article (APA)

Miranda, R.C.N.A., Pereira, E.R., Silva, R.M.C.R.A., Medeiros, A.Y.B.B.V., & Dias, F.A. (2020). Meaning of life in healthy aging: contributions from Viktor Frankl's theory. REFACS, 8(4), 943-951. Retrieved in *insert day, month and year of access* from *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.