

FROM THE WILL TO MEANING TO THE EXISTENTIAL CIRCUMPLEX

A research journey through Logotherapy, Self-Transcendence, and Existential Psychology

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This article is an English translation of [“Dalla volontà di significato al Circumplesso Esistenziale.”](#) originally published in Italian on [psyeventi.it](#) (19 June 2026).

Abstract

*This article presents the research journey that led from Viktor Frankl's concept of the **Will to Meaning** to the development of the **Existential Circumplex**, a two-dimensional model of existential functioning based on the interaction between **Meaning in Life** and **Self-Transcendence**. Beginning with the theoretical foundations of Logotherapy, it retraces the psychometric research that supported the development of assessment instruments and the empirical investigation of these two constructs. The article then introduces the theoretical rationale underlying the Existential Circumplex and briefly illustrates its potential implications for psychological assessment, psychotherapy, education, and research. Finally, it situates the model within the broader interdisciplinary perspective presented in *The Theory of Everything Within*, highlighting the complementary relationship between empirical investigation and symbolic reflection in the study of human existence.*

Keywords: *Existential Circumplex; Meaning in Life; Self-Transcendence; Logotherapy; Existential Psychology; Psychological Assessment; Viktor Frankl.*

1. The Starting Question

Why are some people able to find meaning in their lives even under the most difficult circumstances, while others seem to lose all sense of direction when confronted with the very same challenges?

At first glance, this may seem like a simple question. Yet it has echoed through centuries of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual reflection on the human condition. It becomes especially compelling when we encounter suffering, illness, failure, bereavement, or the major existential crises that inevitably shape every human life.

Among the scholars who explored this question most profoundly was **Viktor Frankl**, the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and founder of **Logotherapy**. Having survived the Nazi concentration camps, Frankl observed that even under the most inhumane conditions, some individuals were able to preserve a reason to live, an inner sense of direction, and the capacity to look beyond their immediate suffering.

From this experience emerged one of the central concepts of his theory: the **will to meaning**. According to Frankl, the primary motivation of human beings is neither the pursuit of pleasure nor the pursuit of power, but the search for a meaning capable of giving direction to one's existence. When people perceive that their lives have a purpose, a direction, or a mission, they can endure hardships that might otherwise seem unbearable.

Frankl's reflection, however, extends beyond meaning itself. Throughout his work, a second concept gradually emerges — less widely known, yet equally fundamental: **self-transcendence**. According to Frankl, human beings fulfil themselves not by remaining centred on their own needs, but by moving beyond themselves through love, service, commitment to a cause, responsibility toward others, or openness to a spiritual and transcendent dimension.

Paradoxically, the more people seek self-fulfilment as an end in itself, the more likely they are to lose it. Conversely, when they orient themselves toward something — or someone — beyond their immediate self-interest, they often discover a deeper meaning in their own existence.

This insight became the starting point of a research journey that has accompanied me for many years through clinical practice, academic work, and scientific investigation. Over time, one question became increasingly clear: what is the relationship between meaning in life and self-transcendence? Are they two expressions of the same psychological reality? Are they independent dimensions? Do they develop together, or can they follow distinct developmental pathways?

These questions gave rise to a research programme that, through theoretical studies, psychological assessment instruments, and empirical investigations, gradually led to the formulation of a new theoretical framework: the **Existential Circumplex**.

2. The Psychometric Journey

If meaning in life and self-transcendence are two fundamental dimensions of human existence, can they also be measured?

This question became a central focus of the research. While Logotherapy offers a rich theoretical understanding of the search for meaning, many of its clinical and existential insights have traditionally been supported by relatively limited empirical evidence. A methodological challenge therefore emerged: could these existential dimensions be observed, measured, and studied using the tools of psychological research?

Addressing this question required complementing philosophical reflection with psychometric investigation. The goal was to determine whether meaning in life and self-transcendence could be reliably assessed and empirically explored across different populations.

Within this framework, several assessment instruments were developed or employed, including the **PILS (Purpose in Life Scale)** and the **Self-Transcendence Scale**, designed to assess an

individual's tendency to orient toward values, purposes, relationships, and realities that extend beyond immediate self-interest.

The findings revealed a particularly interesting pattern. Meaning in life and self-transcendence were consistently and substantially correlated, yet they clearly did not represent the same psychological construct. Some individuals reported a strong sense of purpose and existential direction while showing relatively limited openness toward others or toward transcendent values. Others displayed a pronounced orientation toward service, spirituality, or concern for others, despite experiencing uncertainty about the overall meaning of their own lives.

These findings suggested that the two constructs, although deeply interconnected, retain a significant degree of psychological autonomy.

The results of this research were presented in the book *Will to Meaning and Self-Transcendence as an Interpersonal Motivational System* (FrancoAngeli, 2022), which proposed that the search for meaning should be understood not simply as an individual need, but as an interpersonal motivational system. Within this perspective, self-transcendence is not viewed as a marginal phenomenon or an exclusively spiritual experience. Rather, it represents a fundamental process of human development, closely associated with psychological well-being, resilience, and the capacity to build meaningful relationships.

Yet the empirical findings also raised a new question. If meaning in life and self-transcendence are distinct but related dimensions, how can their relationship best be represented? Is there a model capable of describing the different existential configurations that emerge from their interaction?

Answering this question became the next step in the research journey and ultimately led to the development of the Existential Circumplex.

3. The Theoretical Challenge

At this point, the central question had become clear: are meaning in life and self-transcendence really the same psychological construct?

At first glance, the answer might appear to be yes. Much of the logotherapeutic tradition treats these concepts as deeply intertwined, and empirical research has consistently shown that higher levels of spirituality, altruism, and prosocial engagement are generally associated with a stronger sense of meaning in life.

Yet correlation does not imply identity.

Both clinical experience and empirical findings pointed to a more complex reality. Some individuals displayed a clear sense of purpose and existential direction while remaining relatively closed to others or to transcendent values. Others — such as volunteers, healthcare professionals, social workers, or individuals deeply committed to serving others — showed high levels of self-

transcendence, even while experiencing periods of uncertainty about the overall meaning of their own lives.

If the two constructs were truly identical, they should invariably increase and decrease together. But if they represent partially independent dimensions, four different existential configurations should, at least in principle, be possible:

- high meaning in life and high self-transcendence;
- high meaning in life with low self-transcendence;
- high self-transcendence with low meaning in life;
- low levels of both dimensions.

This possibility opened an entirely new theoretical perspective. Perhaps existential functioning cannot be adequately represented along a single linear continuum ranging from the absence of meaning to the presence of meaning. Instead, it may be better understood as a multidimensional psychological space in which meaning in life and self-transcendence interact while preserving their conceptual distinctiveness.

Could this relationship be represented within a two-dimensional model capable of describing the different configurations of human existential functioning?

The search for an answer to this question ultimately led to the formulation of the Existential Circumplex.

4. The Emergence of the Existential Circumplex

The search for an answer took a decisive step forward through my scientific collaboration with **Professor Giuseppe Crea**, Professor of Psychometrics and Existential Psychology at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome. Drawing on decades of experience in Logotherapy, psychological assessment, and psychometric research, Professor Crea recognized that circumplex models — already widely employed in the study of personality, values, and interpersonal behaviour — could provide an appropriate structural framework for representing existential functioning.

From this convergence emerged the Existential Circumplex.

The model proposes that human existential functioning can be understood as the interaction between two fundamental dimensions: meaning in life and self-transcendence.

The Meaning in Life Dimension

The first dimension represents the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as meaningful, coherent, and purposefully directed. At one end are people who experience a clear existential direction, coherent values, and a stable sense of purpose. At the opposite end lie conditions characterised by *existential vacuum*, disorientation, and difficulty identifying a meaningful direction in life.

The Self-Transcendence Dimension

The second dimension represents the degree of openness toward realities that extend beyond immediate self-interest. Higher levels are characterised by concern for others, generativity, spirituality, and social responsibility. Lower levels reflect a greater focus on personal needs and self-centred concerns.

The innovative aspect of the model lies in treating these two dimensions as conceptually distinct yet *partially independent* organising principles. Consequently, individuals may report high levels of meaning in life while displaying relatively low self-transcendence, or vice versa. Together, these dimensions define a two-dimensional psychological space that captures the complexity of existential functioning more effectively than any single linear scale.

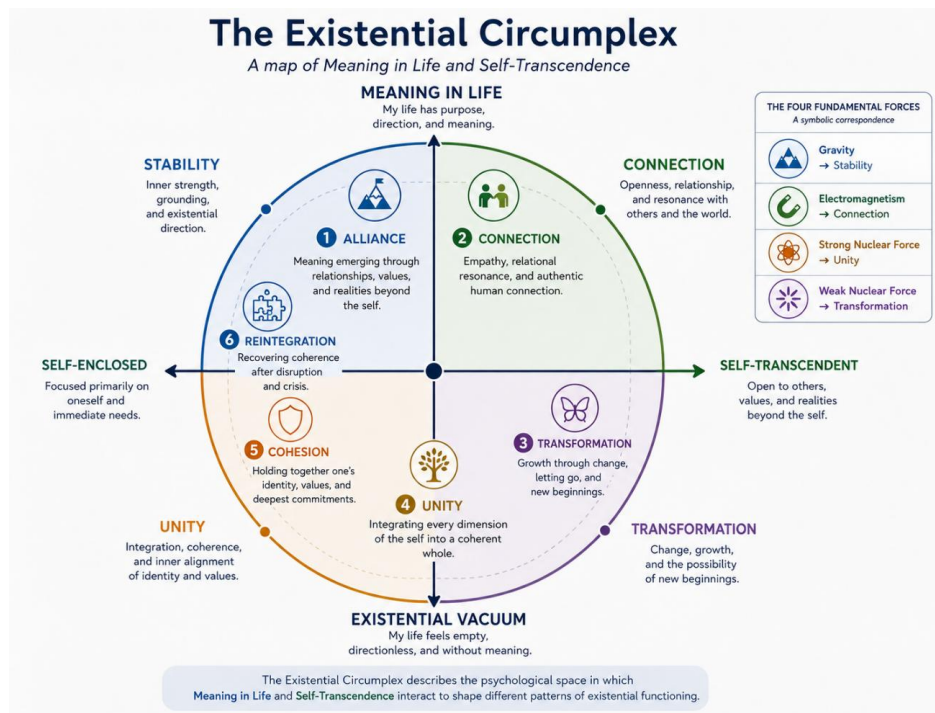


Figure 1. Conceptual representation of the Existential Circumplex - a map of Meaning in Life and Self-Transcendence.

Four Configurations of Existential Functioning

The intersection of the two dimensions generates four broad existential configurations.

High Meaning in Life – High Self-Transcendence. Individuals with a clear sense of existential direction who orient their lives toward values, relationships, and purposes extending beyond themselves. Within the model, this configuration is associated with the highest levels of existential integration.

High Meaning in Life – Low Self-Transcendence. Individuals with a strong sense of purpose, personal agency, and life direction, but with relatively limited openness toward relational or transcendent dimensions. Meaning is present, yet remains largely centred on individual fulfilment.

Low Meaning in Life – High Self-Transcendence. Individuals who demonstrate genuine concern for others, generosity, or spiritual openness while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty regarding the overall meaning of their own lives. From both clinical and educational perspectives, this represents one of the most interesting configurations.

Low Meaning in Life – Low Self-Transcendence. Individuals characterised by existential emptiness, isolation, loss of direction, and limited openness toward values beyond the self.

A Conceptual Map, Not a Label

The Existential Circumplex was not developed to classify individuals or assign diagnostic labels. Rather, it is intended as a conceptual framework for describing different patterns of existential functioning and for guiding future research, psychological assessment, psychotherapy, and educational practice.

The model is presented in detail in the article:

Grammatico, S., & Crea, G. (2026). *The Existential Circumplex: Meaning in Life and Self-Transcendence as Orthogonal Dimensions of Existential Functioning*. *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*, 18(2), 39–63.

The article presents the theoretical foundations of the model, reviews the relevant international literature, and reports preliminary empirical findings obtained from a pilot study involving 300 participants using Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

5. Beyond the Model: Toward an Integrated Vision of the Human Person

Every psychological model, however useful, remains a map rather than the territory itself. Maps help us navigate complexity, understand relationships among phenomena, and formulate new hypotheses. Yet no map can fully capture the richness of the human experience it seeks to describe.

The Existential Circumplex was developed with this awareness. Its purpose is not to explain the entirety of human existence, but to provide a coherent framework for understanding two fundamental dimensions of existential functioning: meaning in life and self-transcendence.

As the research progressed, however, a broader question gradually emerged:

How do these two dimensions fit within a more comprehensive understanding of the human person — one that also embraces relationships, spirituality, and our place within the wider universe?

This question eventually led to the writing of **The Theory of Everything Within**, now available in Italian, English, and Spanish.

Unlike the Existential Circumplex, this book is not presented as a psychometric or psychological model. Rather, it is an interdisciplinary reflection that brings psychology into dialogue with science, philosophy, and spirituality through the language of symbolic interpretation.

Within the book, the four fundamental forces of physics become metaphors for four essential dimensions of human experience:

- Gravity, representing grounding, belonging, and the love that attracts and sustains us;
- Electromagnetism, symbolising relationship, empathy, and interpersonal resonance;
- The Strong Nuclear Force, expressing inner cohesion, vocational fidelity, and existential unity;
- The Weak Nuclear Force, representing transformation, crisis, renewal, and personal growth.

The aim is neither to construct a physical theory of the psyche nor to attribute psychological meanings to the laws of nature. Rather, the symbolic language of physics is used as a bridge for reflecting on some of the most enduring questions of human existence:

Who am I? Why do I exist? What meaning can suffering have? How can I contribute to the lives of others?

From this perspective, the Existential Circumplex and The Theory of Everything Within represent two complementary levels of the same intellectual and existential journey.

The first seeks to understand and empirically investigate fundamental dimensions of existential functioning. The second places those same dimensions within a broader symbolic narrative capable of integrating psychological research with spirituality, philosophical reflection, and the universal human search for meaning.

The Existential Circumplex offers the map.

The Theory of Everything Within invites the reader to undertake the journey.

6. Conclusion

Every research journey begins with a question. Mine appeared deceptively simple:

Why are some people able to discover meaning even in the most difficult circumstances?

Over the years, that question led me through Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy, the development of psychometric instruments, the study of self-transcendence, empirical research, and, ultimately, the formulation of the Existential Circumplex.

What gradually emerged is both a simple and a profound insight: meaning in life and self-transcendence appear to represent two fundamental dimensions of human existence. On the one hand lies our need to orient our lives, to understand who we are, and to discover our place in the

world. On the other lies our capacity to move beyond ourselves, opening our lives to others, to values, to responsibility, and to transcendent horizons.

When these two dimensions come together, life seems to acquire a deeper coherence. Difficulties do not disappear, suffering is not erased, but both can become integrated into a broader and more meaningful life story.

The Existential Circumplex represents an attempt to describe this dynamic through the language of psychological science. The Theory of Everything Within explores the same reality through symbolic, anthropological, and interdisciplinary reflection. Although they differ in purpose and methodology, both arise from the same conviction: the human person is far more than the sum of behaviours, symptoms, or performance. Human beings are inherently oriented toward the search for meaning and possess the capacity to transcend themselves through love, relationships, service, creativity, and hope.

Perhaps the most important question is not where we find ourselves today within this existential map, but toward which direction we are moving.

Because the search for meaning is never a destination reached once and for all.

It is a lifelong journey — one that continually invites us to discover new horizons of meaning, relationship, and self-transcendence.

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