

EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

Psychology 460
Counseling and Interviewing
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Quotations

- ✦ "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances – to choose one's own way."
– Victor Frankl

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Quotations

- ✦ "Man's Search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning... Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values!"
– Victor Frankl

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Quotations

- ✦ "The deeper sorrow carves into your being the more joy you can contain."
– Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

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Existential Approach

- ✦ Developed as a reaction against
 - Psychoanalysis
 - Behaviorism
- ✦ Goes against use of "techniques";
- ✦ Instead focus is on
 - "understanding what it means to be human"

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Key Concepts

- ✦ Human is a constant state of transition:
 - Emerging, evolving and "becoming"
- ✦ We pose questions:
 - "Who Am I"
 - "What can I know"
 - "Where Am I Going"
 - "What ought I do"
 - "What can I hope for"

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Existential Therapy

A Philosophical/Intellectual Approach to Therapy

- Definition:
 - a philosophical approach that emphasizes our freedom to choose what to make of our circumstances
 - So we are free & therefore responsible for our choices & actions
- APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HUMANS

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Existential Therapy

A Philosophical/Intellectual Approach to Therapy

- Existential therapy **reacts against** tendency to view therapy as a system of well-defined techniques
- It affirms looking at those unique characteristics that make us human & building therapy on them
- Emphasizes **choice, freedom, responsibility & self-determination**
- In essence, we are the author of our life
- Awareness of our **eventual nonbeing acts as a catalyst for finding meaning**

Existential Therapy

A Philosophical/Intellectual Approach to Therapy

- Existential movement stands for respect for the person, exploring new aspects of human behavior, & divergent methods of understanding people

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Existential Therapy

A Philosophical/Intellectual Approach to Therapy

- BASIC DIMENSIONS – OF THE HUMAN CONDITION (6 Propositions)
 - **Capacity for self-awareness**
 - **Tension between freedom & responsibility**
 - **Creating one's identity & establishing meaningful relationships**
 - **Search for meaning, purpose, values, & goals**
 - **Accepting anxiety as a condition of living**
 - **Awareness of death and nonbeing**

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APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HUMANS

- Philosophical assumptions underlying the existential approach include the notions that:
 - We are 'thrust' into a meaningless & absurd world & that we are basically alone
 - We must create our own meanings through choices

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Capacity for Self-Awareness

- **Prop. 1: WE HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR SELF-AWARENESS** - Corey
- To expand our awareness is to increase our capacity to live fully
- The greater our awareness, the greater our possibilities for freedom
- Awareness is realizing that:
 - We are finite - time is limited
 - We have the potential, the choice, to act or not to act
 - Meaning is not automatic - we must seek it
 - We are subject to loneliness, meaninglessness, emptiness, guilt, and isolation

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Freedom and Responsibility

- **Prop. 2:** BECAUSE WE ARE BASICALLY FREE BEINGS, WE MUST ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY THAT ACCOMPANIES OUR FREEDOM - Corey
- This central issue in therapy leads to
 - (1) Commitment to Choose and
 - (2) Being Authentic
- This existential idea involves the notion that
 - Our freedom requires us to accept responsibility for directing our own life
 - We are free to choose who we will be
 - They go hand in hand
- Rollo May
 - Contends F & R are two sides of same coin

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Freedom and Responsibility

- We are free to choose among alternatives...we have a role in shaping our destinies
- "Bad Faith" (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1971)
 - The *inauthenticity* of not accepting personal responsibility
 - "Naturally I grew up this way b/c I'm from an alcoholic family" (playing the victim role; blaming external forces)
- The guilt we experience when we don't live authentically
- Inauthenticity is assuming external forces control our lives
- Assuming responsibility is a basic condition for change (e.g., AA)
- Clients who refuse to accept responsibility by persistently Blaming others for their problems will not benefit from therapy

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Freedom and Responsibility

- People come into counseling feeling they've lost control of their lives
- They want advice & magical cures
- Job of existential therapists is to
 - recognize how client has given away power &
 - help client work toward autonomy

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Note: Authorship

- Notion of authorship states that we are authors of our life in the sense that we create our
 - Destiny
 - Life situation
 - Problems

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Identity and Relationship

- **Prop. 3:** WE HAVE A CONCERN TO PRESERVE OUR UNIQUENESS & IDENTITY; WE COME TO KNOW OURSELVES IN RELATION TO KNOWING & INTERACTING WITH OTHERS - Corey
- **Striving for Identity & Responsibility to others:**
 - Helps us find & create our personal identity
 - *Courage to be* takes a lot of guts b/c we may not like what we see
 - People fear they'll discover they have no core; no self

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Identity and Relationship

- **Experience of aloneness:**
 - Part of human condition
 - We must learn to enjoy being alone before we can enjoy being with others
 - We are ultimately alone, yet related
 - We alone must give a sense of meaning to our life
 - The experience of relatedness will improve once you're comfortable with yourself

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Identity and Relationship

- **Identity is "the courage to be"**
 - We must trust ourselves to search within and find our own answers
- **Struggling with our identity**
 - "some become trapped in a "doing" mode to avoid the experience of "being"

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Identity and Relationship

- **"DON'T GET SO BUSY MAKING A LIVING THAT YOU FORGET TO MAKE A LIFE"**

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Identity and Relationship

- **Relatedness**
 - **At their best our relationships are based on our desire for fulfillment, not our deprivation**
 - **Relationships that spring from our sense of deprivation are clinging, parasitic, and symbiotic**
 - **When we can stand alone, then relationships are based on our "fulfillment" and not on our "deprivation"**

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Search for Meaning

- **Prop. 4: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR EXISTENCE & THE MEANING OF OUR LIFE ARE NEVER FIXED ONCE & FOR ALL; INSTEAD, WE RE-CREATE OURSELVES THROUGH OUR PROJECTS - Corey**
- **Meaning – like pleasure, meaning must be pursued obliquely**
 - **Finding meaning in life is a by-product of a commitment to creating, loving, and working**
- **"The will to meaning" is our primary striving**
 - **Life is not meaningful in itself; WE must create and discover meaning**
- **Problem of discarding old values and not replacing them with suitable new ones**

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Search for Meaning

- **Meaningless in life leads to emptiness & hollowness**
- **Existential vacuum:**
 - emptiness and hollowness
- **Existential guilt:**
 - **Being aware of**
 - **having evaded a commitment, or**
 - **having chosen NOT to choose**
 - **Realization we're not what we might have become**
- **Creating new meaning in our lives**
 - **c/n directly look for meaning:**
 - **Finding meaning is a by-product of "engagement":**
 - **A commitment to creating, loving, working, & building**

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Search for Meaning

- **WHAT DO YOU 'CREATE' EVERYDAY?**
- **WHAT DO YOU 'BUILD' EVERYDAY?**
- **WHAT DO YOU 'LOVE' EVERYDAY?**

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Anxiety – A Condition of Living

- **Prop. 5: ANXIETY IS PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION**
- *Existential anxiety is normal* - life cannot be lived, nor can death be faced, without anxiety
 - Anxiety can be a stimulus for growth as we become aware of and accept our freedom
 - We can blunt our anxiety by creating the illusion that there is security in life
 - If we have the courage to face ourselves and life we may be frightened, but we will be able to change
 - Need normal anxiety to be able to survive (we don't strive to eliminate this!)
 - **Neurotic anxiety is NOT healthy, and is very limiting (out of proportion to situation)**

Anxiety – A Condition of Living

- **We can blunt anxiety by restricting our lives & thus reducing choices**
- **Opening up to NEW life means opening up to anxieties**

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Awareness of Death and Nonbeing

- **Prop. 6: DEATH IS ALSO A BASIC HUMAN CONDITION, AND AWARENESS OF IT GIVES SIGNIFICANCE TO LIVING**
- It is a basic human condition and it is necessary so that we can think about life
- According to the existential viewpoint, death gives significance to living

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Awareness of Death and Nonbeing

- We have **LIMITED** time to complete our projects!
- **Each moment is crucial!**
- **Our awareness of death is the source of ZEST for life & creativity!**
- **Answer the following:**
 - "If you knew you had **1 week to live**, how would you spend it?"
 - "If you knew you had **1 year to live**, how would you spend it?"
 - "If you knew you had **10 years to live**, how would you spend it?"

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Relationship Between Therapist & Client

- **Therapy is a journey taken by therapist and client**
 - Person-to-person relationship/encounter is a stimulus to positive change in client
 - Relationship demands that therapists be in contact with their own phenomenological world
- **Core of the therapeutic relationship**
 - Respect & faith in the clients' potential to cope
 - Sharing reactions with genuine concern & empathy
 - Therapists model authentic behavior
- **Existentialists contend that the experience of relatedness to other human beings can be therapeutic in and of itself**

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Relationship Between Therapist & Client

- **Client-therapist relationship is of paramount importance because quality of the I/Thou encounter offers a context for change**
- **Instead of prizing therapeutic objectivity & professional distance, existential therapists value being fully present, & they strive to create caring relationships with clients**
- **Therapy is a collaborative relationship in which both client & therapist are involved in a journey of self-discovery**
- **KEY: to help client transfer what is learned outside therapy**

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Therapists

- **Most crucial quality of therapist in building an effective therapeutic relationship with a client:**
 - Therapist's authenticity
- **Therapist's function and role**
 - Understanding the subjective world of client
 - Focus on client's current life situation
 - Therapists use a wide range of methods depending on client
 - Therapists dislike specific techniques

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Therapists

- **Deal with clients who have a "restricted existence"**
 - I.e., clients have limited awareness of self
 - I.e., clients vague about nature of their problem
- **Therapy holds a mirror for client to examine self**

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Client's Experience in Therapy

- **Take experiences seriously**
 - Client expected to be active in their therapy
- **Take responsibility for choices in their world**
 - Client confronts "ultimate concerns" rather than "immediate problems"
- **It is frightening, exciting, joyful, depressing, or a combination of all of these**
- **Confrontation of concerns in their life**
 - Expected to go out into world & decide how they will live differently

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BASIC GOALS OF EXISTENTIAL THEORY

- **To expand self-awareness**
- **To increase choice potentials**
- **To help clients accept the responsibility of choosing**
- **To help the client experience authentic existence**
- **BASICALLY AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO THERAPY**

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Existential therapy

- **Basic Therapeutic Goals:**
 - **To recognize factors that block freedom**
 - **To challenge clients to recognize that they are doing something that they formerly thought was happening to them**
 - **To accept the freedom and responsibility that go along with action**
 - **Corey**

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Existential therapy

- Based on a growth mode and
- Conceptualizes health rather than sickness
- De-emphasis on techniques
- Use of therapist's self is core of therapy
- Attention is given to clients' immediate, ongoing experience with aim of helping them develop greater presence in their quest for meaning & purpose
- At beginning of therapy, therapist helps the client identify & clarify the assumptions about the world
 - (often clients focus on external things to blame)
- Then, clients are encouraged to examine the source and authority of their present value system
 - (clients gain new insights & reconstruct values)
- Finally, therapist help clients implement what they have learned about themselves (apply new learning to life!!!)

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Existential Therapeutic Process

- An invitation to clients to recognize ways in which they aren't living authentic lives & make different choices to be all that they can become
- Challenge client's narrow & compulsive trends
- Challenge their notion that they're inwardly enslaved & someone else can free them
- Existential therapists do NOT cure clients, but get them out of the victim role
 - **When have you blamed someone else for YOUR unhappiness?**
- Increased awareness is the central goal of existentialism
- Therapy is the process of bringing out the latent "aliveness" in a client
 - **What aliveness is latent in you? To dance, to sing, love, plant flowers, paint, etc?**

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Criticism

- **A major criticism of existential approach is that it lacks a systematic statement of the principles & practices of psychotherapy**
- **Not a system of highly developed techniques**

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Major Players

- **Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**
 - The founder of the "philosophy of existence"
 - Proposed that
 - truth lies in subjective rather than presumptions of objectivity
 - True existence is achieved by intensity of feeling
 - Anguish: a revelation of the possibilities which lie beyond one's constricted existence
 - Passion: the quality of striving to come into being
 - True heroism: a "daring to be entirely oneself, alone before God"

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Major Players

- **Friedrich Nietzsche**
 - Talked about our
 - "will to power" &
 - "herd mortality"

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Major Players

- **Jean-Paul Sartre**
- **EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE**
 - "Freedom is existence, & in it existence precedes essence."
 - This means that what we do, how we act in our life, determines our apparent "qualities"
 - It is not that someone tells the truth because she is honest, but rather she defines herself as honest by telling the truth again and again
 - Existential guilt is what we experience when
 - We allow others to define us or to make our choices for us

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Major Players

- **Binswanger**
 - World-design:
 - The all encompassing pattern of an individual's mode of being-in-the-world
 - The borders of the design may be narrow & constricting or broad & expansive, open or closed, disclosed or concealed, light or dark

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Major Players

➤ **Medard Boss**

- Dasein:
 - Being-in-the-world: ideally should be open to one's past & future as well as one's present
- Daseinanalysis:
 - Trying to see what is in one's experience & describe it as accurately as possible
 - Careful elucidation of specific nature of human being-in-the-world

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Major Players

➤ **Victor Frankl** (1905-1997)

- Born in Vienna, Austria
- Spent time in concentration camps 1942-1945 (Auschwitz & Dachau)
- M.D. in 1930; Ph.D. in 1949 Univ of Vienna
- Works translated into over 30 languages
- Best seller: "Man's Search for Meaning" 1963
- Coined LOGOTHERAPY: Therapy through meaning "will to meaning"

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Major Players

➤ **Rollo May** (1909-1994)

- Responsible for bringing Existentialism from Europe to U.S.
- Instrumental in translating some concepts drawn from existential philosophy & applying them to therapy
- "It takes courage to "be" and our choices determine the kind of person we will become"
- Neurotic anxiety is the result of **not** facing normal anxiety
 - To run away from anxiety means automatically surrendering a measure of one's freedom

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Major Players

➤ **Irving Yalom** & James Bugental (2 modern day Existentialists)

- Yalom: The concerns that make up the core of existential psychodynamics are:
 - Death
 - Freedom
 - Isolation
 - Meaninglessness

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Some Counseling Situations Dealing with Existential Problems

- I feel like my existence does not matter to anyone. If I were to die today, I fully believe that it wouldn't make a difference to anyone.
- I keep looking outside of me for answers. I try hard to be whatever anyone else expects me to become. I see myself as a stranger to myself. I really don't know who I am, and what's worse, at this point I don't even know what I would like to become.

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Some Counseling Situations Dealing with Anxiety

- Person has had a lucrative & secure job for years but is now becoming aware that it is sterile, unexciting, & dull.
- He finally musters the courage to leave this secure job & go into business for himself
- He experiences more challenges & excitement, yet he is filled with anxiety of failing
- What is real fear?
- What are some ways of coping with these fears?

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