

Ordinary People Application Paper: Existential Therapy

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Existential therapy is not as much about specific techniques but is more of an approach or attitude about psychotherapy (Corey, 2017). The nature of anxiety, meaning in life, freedom, responsibility, and isolation are some themes explored in therapy. A basic premise is that clients must recognize their choices and freedom in life and accept responsibility rather than feeling like victims of their circumstances and passively surrendering control over their lives where inaction is a decision (Corey, 2017). Assuming responsibility for our lives can lead to change, and our existential guilt can motivate us to change and live more authentically. This guilt may be from not acting on the anxiety we may feel about what is possible to do.

In therapy, two essential tasks for therapists are to "invite clients to recognize how they have allowed others to decide for them and encouraging them to take steps toward choosing for themselves" (Corey, 2017, p. 140). According to Victor Frankl, one of the central figures in developing existential therapy, lack of meaning is a significant source of stress and anxiety. So, he developed logotherapy to help clients find meaning in their lives. Here, clients explore their past, present, and future to help them identify or reconnect with potential meaning in their lives and what they value. In addition, existentialists view the awareness of death as a human condition that can affect how we live life, and anxiety is part of the human condition of living.

Conrad could be experiencing existential neurosis as he may feel a lack of meaning after returning to school. His symptoms include apathy, detachment, loss of appetite, and trouble sleeping as he is off staring into space and then tries to hide those symptoms from his dad when asked. In addition, Conrad could be experiencing meaninglessness as he grapples with the notions of death and how to create meaning in his life despite the trauma of his attempted suicide and his brother's death.

If I were Dr. Berger, I would use logotherapy to help Conrad find meaning in his life again, and I would have him confront some of his negative feelings by first becoming aware of and acknowledging them. Then, I would help Conrad explore some of his past, present, and future to help identify some potential sources of meaningful connection. As stated in Corey (2017, p.144), "Frankl (1978) contends that people who confront pain, guilt, despair, and death can effectively deal with their despair and thus triumph." Another technique I would use is to help him realize the freedom he has to choose and that he is responsible for taking actions more congruent to what makes meaning and brings him joy. Finally, I would create my authentic way of being attuned to Conrad and his needs, as there is no one right way to do therapy for existentialists.

The existential approach would benefit Conrad since he experienced the death of his brother and his own attempted suicide. As a result, he is at a crossroads in figuring out how to move on and make meaning in his life worth living. Since there is no one right technique, Conrad would benefit from an attuned and authentic therapist who is not afraid to hear Conrad's anger or his negative emotions. By safely confronting and expressing those feelings, Conrad can make meaning from them that helps him take action. Another benefit to this therapy that would help Conrad explore his relationship with his mom is his ability to realize his dependent attachment versus a life-affirming relationship with her. Existential therapy would challenge someone to "examine what they get from their relationships, how they avoid intimate contact, how they prevent themselves from having equal relationships, and how they might create therapeutic, healthy, and mature human relationships" (Corey, 2017, p. 143).

References

- Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.
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