

Ordinary People Application Paper: Existential Therapy

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Existential therapy is not a particular school of counseling but rather a philosophical framework to approach therapy based on existential philosophies espoused by several 19th- and 20th-century thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre (Corey, 2017; Tan, 2011). It explores human nature and the human experience of existence, asking deep questions about what it means to be human.

The fundamental belief of an existentially oriented therapist is that people have an innate capacity for self-awareness (Corey, 2017). As our consciousness grows, we come to realize we are finite beings, bound to face certainties in life such as death, aloneness, and meaninglessness. Despite such “givens of existence,” we as humans desire to discover a personal identity, strive for connectedness with others, and struggle to find significance and purpose to living. It is this will to search for meaning that becomes the main human motivation. Freedom and along with it, responsibility, is another fundamental human condition. We are free to choose how we live our lives and to create our own destiny but are also held responsible for our choices. Choosing to be *authentic* is emphasized as the best option to healthy existence (Tan, 2011). It implies being transparent and true to ourselves, and living a meaningful life according to our values. In addition, existential theorists claim that anxiety is also a core part of living. When we are aware of the existential realities of mortality, isolation, emptiness, and our freedom and responsibility to respond to them, we invariably experience *existential anxiety*. On one hand, this anxiety is normal and can be “a powerful motivational force toward change and growth” (Ruben & Lichtanski, 2015, as cited in Corey, 2017, p. 145); on the other hand, avoiding it by lying to ourselves and to others gives rise to psychological and emotional problems (Tan, 2011). Lying is inauthentic living, which means lacking awareness of ourselves, failing to acknowledge our

freedom to choose, and not accepting personal responsibility for our lives. This can then lead to *neurotic anxiety*, which is a paralyzing anxiety that is out of proportion to the situation (Corey, 2017), often resulting in other psychopathological symptoms and behaviors (Tan, 2011).

From the existentially oriented viewpoint, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is a young man living an inauthentic mode of existence, anxious and afraid to grapple with the core issues of human existence. He is what Deurzen describes as someone who is “not sick but is sick of life and clumsy at living” (2012, as cited in Corey, 2017). In the beginning of the movie, Conrad has a limited awareness of himself and of his freedom and responsibility in making life choices. As a result, he sees himself as a helpless victim of external forces (i.e., growing up in a dysfunctional family, losing his brother in a boating accident), with few options for dealing with life situations (Redford, 1980). Lacking the courage to create a self-identity, he sells out by allowing others to define him and becoming what they expect of him (i.e., his mother’s expectation that he should be a good swimmer just like his brother), and thus experiences *existential guilt* (Corey, 2017). Conrad also struggles with the human condition of isolation, feeling like he is alone in facing the world (he keeps to himself at home and in school with no one to share his feelings and thoughts). Deep inside, he yearns for loving relationships and intimacy with those around him (his parents, Karen, and the girl he likes) but he does not know how to in a healthy and authentic way. Furthermore, the unexpected death of his brother brings him face to face with the existential reality of man’s mortality. Instead of acceptance, Conrad does not properly grieve over this deep loss and tries to cover over the associated painful feelings of anger, guilt, and sorrow. The tragedy of his brother’s death also accentuates the meaninglessness of life and his own lack of life direction (*existential neurosis*), so much so that he attempts suicide as an ultimate escape from this hard existence.

As an existential therapist, I hope to help Conrad move courageously towards more authentic living. He needs to grow in self-awareness, to discover his identity from within, to find meaning of life amid difficult circumstances, to assume responsibility for making life choices, to accept the reality of death and loss, and to develop healthy, loving relationships with others. For these changes to come about, I believe the key is not a particular technique or intervention but a client-centered therapeutic relationship that is characterized by respect and genuine care.

According to Yalom, “it is this therapeutic relationship that heals” (1980, as cited in Tan, 2011, p. 111) To establish such a relationship with Conrad, I need to be present and attuned to his subjective world while modeling for him authenticity, integrity, and courage to delve deeply into core existential issues. For example, during our therapeutic encounter, I would use empathic listening and *attitude modification* to help him process his grief over his brother’s death and find a more meaningful perspective on this painful reality. I would also do some *self-disclosure*, sharing honestly with Conrad some of my own experiences with the death of those I love.

I think existential therapy will be helpful for Conrad for many reasons. First, it provides him with a philosophical framework to understand and address his current struggles and anxieties over existential issues. Second, this form of therapy is found to be most appropriate for someone like Conrad- someone facing developmental crisis (i.e. struggle for identity in adolescence), confronting death and experiencing grief, contemplating suicide and on the edge of existence, and feeling alienated from society (Corey, 2017; Tan, 2011). Third, the warm, caring, and authentic relationship with an existential therapist would help to fill his deep need for relational connection.

References

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