

“Ordinary People”

Existential Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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Conrad Jarret is a teenager who suffers from depression and has recently attempted suicide. He has just been released from the psychiatric hospital, where he was admitted for four months. While at the hospital, Conrad received individual and group counseling and electric shock treatment. Conrad started his junior year in high school shortly after returning home from the hospital but had some challenges reintegrating socially and appeared to spend much time alone. He also has been struggling with severe guilt over the death of his brother, Buck, and has difficulty sleeping. In addition, he has been dealing with challenges in his relationship with his mother, which seem to have been going on before the death of his brother. Conrad's reason for seeking counseling is that he feels he has lost control over his life and wants more power.

I will work with Conrad from an existential approach to help him increase self-awareness and understand his freedom—his individual choice and responsibility. We will explore the concept of free will and address whatever anxieties Conrad is experiencing about his life regarding confronting feelings of loneliness, isolation, and death. Conrad will learn that he plays a significant role in creating meaning in his life, which will help him find a purpose for living. According to existential theory, Conrad must understand that life itself has no meaning but what we assign to it. Therefore, he must design the pathway he wants to follow rather than surrender to control his circumstances or other external factors.

Several European psychologists and psychiatrists founded and developed existential psychotherapy as early as the 1940s and 1950s. The life challenges influenced the views that some of its early founders experienced during World War I and the Nazi camps, which compelled them to discover a greater meaning and purpose for life. For example, existentialist

theorist Victor Frankl was a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps and later developed logotherapy which focused on the importance of life. Frankl believed that life has meaning, and irrespective of the circumstance; we can ascertain the significant purpose of life that makes life worth living (Corey, 2015).

Irving Yalom's existential approach to psychotherapy focused on freedom and responsibility, existential isolation, meaninglessness, and death, which he called the four "givens of existence," or ultimate human concerns that deal with the client's existence or being-in-the-world (Corey, 2015). Rollo Mayo, another influential existential theory voice, focused on accepting freedom and responsibility and learning your identity. For Mayo, it was also important to understand power by recognizing it and knowing how to deal with it.

Existential therapy is more about a philosophical way of thinking or an attitude that influences how a counselor practices psychotherapy than an essential technique for counseling. No techniques are specific to existential theory (Corey, 2015). Instead, the existential approach places importance on seeing clients as they authentically are. Therapists are encouraged to choose a therapeutic orientation that is true to their style yet sensitive to their client's personalities and experiences. The therapist's openness, self-disclosure, and connection to the client shape the sessions and are essential to the outcome.

Overall, existential therapy helps clients explore various meanings or themes of life within the context of their struggles. These themes may include mortality, sense, freedom, responsibility, anxiety, and aloneness. The client's discovery or acceptance of life's meaning, value, and purpose depends on whether they embrace or neglect the existential "givens of life." When clients achieve acceptance, they become aware of their alternatives and how their choices can bring them greater meaning in life (Corey, 2015).

Initially, Conrad was apprehensive about counseling, but being genuine and authentic with him has helped to foster a trustworthy environment. Conrad appears to have been struggling with feelings of hopelessness. Cultivating an open dialogue and letting him know I would be a “fellow traveler” with him will help establish a safe space during the counseling sessions. This process has allowed Conrad to explore the negative emotions regarding the accidental death of his brother and feelings of detachment from his mother. Conrad feels lost and disconnected from others and the world and needs to discover new meaning for his life. He must recognize his limits and the tragic dimensions of human existence and that death and alienation are a part of the human experience.

Like person-centered therapy, existentialism’s emphasis is not placed on a set of counseling techniques. Instead, the predominant interest is the client’s subjective experience of being in the world, specifically relating to their feelings of aloneness and the anxiety accompanying that isolation (Corey, 2015). The view is that the purpose or meaning of our existence is never completely discovered. As such, Conrad must understand that he is constantly transitioning and becoming his “true self” as he learns how to respond to the various conflicts in his life. However, first, he must confront the existential philosophical inquiries that all of us at some point must face— “Who am I?” “What can I know?” and “Where am I going?” This will help him explore his values and beliefs and reveal if he is living his authentic life or trying to fulfill the expectation of his parents and others.

Because the existential approach does not restrict the therapist to any therapeutic technique and allows an integrative approach, I would include several approaches, including the psychodynamic free association, person-centered, and cognitive approaches within the existential framework. Through free association, Conrad will freely disclose his thoughts and feelings,

allowing me to enter his subjective and unconscious world. Demonstrating respect and person-centered unconditional positive regard and acceptance will allow Conrad to be more vulnerable, which will help identify the internal conflict between deterministic shackles and Conrad discovering his freedom and authentic self. While this may cause him to develop anxieties, the anxiety is not necessarily unhealthy or neurotic but normal. How Conrad perceives and responds to what he feels will direct the outcome. Conrad must recognize his role in changing his situation and finding the true purpose for his existence. Going through this process will help alleviate the anxiety he is experiencing about life and death.

Knowing his life has a purpose and death is a part of human existence will also resolve his guilt from surviving the boating accident. Conrad must accept that he could not save his brother's life and does not have the power to stop death. He must also understand there is a difference between death as a natural occurrence of life and suicide as someone who does not comprehend the gift of life and has lost hope. Suicide may also be seen as an individual's resolve to neglect personal responsibility for their life ultimately. This does not mean that Conrad's suicidal attempt should be minimized or that any current suicidal ideation is to be ignored. On the contrary, any suggestions of suicide by Conrad will be urgently addressed and prioritized.

I will use the cognitive behavior technique to dispute Conrad's irrational beliefs about being responsible for his brother's death and suicide being an alternative to free him from his internal conflicts. I would have Conrad ask himself questions to challenge his thoughts to help change his negative and irrational thinking pattern. Through the counseling sessions, Conrad will develop a healthy understanding of death—knowing that death and life are interdependent. While death concludes our life on earth, the idea of death should fuel our purpose and creativity for life. Conrad will learn that he has choices and that the control he seeks can only be attained by

accepting responsibility for how he is living and that he does not have an eternity to fulfill his purpose(Corey, 2015). Living intentionally and consciously in the present must become vital. Conrad cannot use the fractured relationship with his mother as the determinant of his value or the cause of how he has been living his life. He is the author of his life and must courageously take ownership of it.

He must not perceive himself as helpless or powerless and must gradually take ownership of his life by reconstructing his values and beliefs (Corey, 2015). Conrad must change his behavior to align with his discovered awareness of self, purpose, and value system.

Reference

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