

Existential Ordinary People Paper

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Existential psychotherapy is closely associated with Dr. Viktor Frankl of Vienna, Austria, among many other European and American psychopathologists. Frankl started his work before the onset of World War II, but was unfortunately forced to continue his research as a prisoner at a concentration camp from 1942 to 1945 due to his Jewish heritage. He personally tested his theories in the camps he stayed in, further establishing and confirming his clinical approaches in existential therapy. According to Gerald Corey, author of *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, this type of psychotherapy is more of a way of thinking rather than a specific type of style for therapy; it focuses on certain themes, such as meaning, freedom, responsibility, anxiety, loneliness and morality (Corey, 2015, pp. 132). The goal of this approach is to help clients reach self-actualization, a concept also used in the humanistic approach by Abraham Maslow, who later included the goal in the motivational “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs” diagram.

The existential approach to therapy believes that people are not victims of circumstance but rather people are what they choose to be. The theory gives power to choice. The first step for a client is to accept responsibility for their choices. This gives a client power to change their circumstances or even the personal outlook on the circumstances. The aim for the existential mindset is to invite clients to explore their beliefs and values and take action according to what grows from this honest evaluation of their life’s purpose (Corey, 2015, pp. 133). The therapist is responsible for encouraging the client to think about what they consider priority in their life and to create a direction which will influence choice making and the experience of freedom.

The film *Ordinary People*, directed by Robert Redford, displays the curious story of a highschool student by the name of Conrad Jarrett. This young man has attempted suicide and

begins the movie showing the audience his discomfort and nervousness with readjusting to his everyday life again. Conrad also experiences nightmares and flashbacks about his older brother's tragic death by a storm while they both were out on a boat. The teenager struggles with feelings of guilt and blames himself for the incident until he has a breakthrough with his counselor, Dr. Berger. Conrad has a broken relationship with his mother, as opposed to the healing relationship he has with his father, which furthers his mental conflict alongside his mourning and feelings of no longer wanting to be around. Conrad has choices to choose from in order to live the life he ultimately wants, according to the existential approach, and he is not living the life he wants to live because of the choices he makes. This theory would help Conrad move towards being more authentic with himself.

The existential approach to therapy is unique in the aspects of technique due to it not being technique-oriented the way many other approaches are. The interventions practitioners use to employ this theory are based on philosophical views about human existence and include the preference of adhering to description, understanding and exploration, rather than the typical diagnosis, treatment and prognosis (Corey, 2015, pp. 149). This allows the therapist to be seen as a friend to talk about deep topics with rather than a "fixer." Because of this, two techniques that would be helpful to Conrad may include group therapy and dream interpretation- one coming from a humanistic perspective and the other from a psychoanalytic one. These techniques would allow Conrad to dig deeper on his personal views and experiences, as well as hear the potentially shared experiences from others which may encourage him to feel empowered and reach self-actualization.

Applying the existential theory to Conrad may be extremely beneficial to him, compared to the other approaches discussed thus far. This approach would allow him to explore what he

truly wants in life and think of ways of reaching those means. Conrad develops a relationship with a crush at school and his mother leaves the house, opening doors of change, comfort and freshness. He loved swimming on his school's swimming team, but suddenly quit, a huge reason possibly being tied to the night of his brother's death on the water. For the teenager to realize that he is not a victim of his circumstances may help him not only get back on track but possibly develop a whole new and better track for his life. He is still young, giving him opportunities to look forward to in the future.

References

Corey, G. (2015). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy 10th Edition*.

Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary People* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.