

**Ordinary People Paper: Existential Theory**

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### **Ordinary People Paper: Existential Theory**

The existential theory is founded on a mindset or attitude towards psychotherapy rather than a particular style of practicing psychotherapy. The focal point of the theory explores themes such as meaning, morality, freedom, anxiety, responsibility, and aloneness as they relate to a person's struggle. The objective of existential theory is to aid clients in their exploration of what existentialists call the "givens of life". Clients are encouraged to reflect on life, recognize their range of alternatives, and decide among them. An existential theorist works in the framework of therapy that provides the assumption that we are free, therefore we are responsible for our own choices and actions. In other words, "we are the authors of our lives and design the pathways we follow" (Corey, 2016, p. 132).

The importance of the existential theory is that it reacts against the tendency to view therapy as a set of techniques, rather than a therapeutic practice based on the foundation of understanding the significance of being a human. In addition, existential theory analyzes new aspects of human behavior and divergent methods for understanding people. Moreover, the theory encompasses a number of approaches to therapy founded on the assumption of human nature. The theory recognizes the limits and tragic dimensions of human existence as well as the possibilities and opportunities of human life. The theory evolved from the desire to help people engage with the dilemmas of contemporary life. Those are isolation, alienation, and meaninglessness. Currently, the focus of the existential approach looks at the individual's experience of being in the world alone and facing the anxiety of isolation.

According to the textbook, the existential view of human nature is captured, in part by the idea that a person's existence is never fixed once and for all, rather we continually recreate

ourselves through our projects. According to the textbook, humans are in a constant state of transition, emerging, evolving, and becoming in response to the tensions, contradictions, and conflicts in our lives. According to the existential approach, the basic dimensions of human conditions include the capacity for self-awareness; freedom, and responsibility; creating one's identity, and establishing meaningful relationships with others; the search for meaning, values, purpose, and goals; anxiety as a condition of living; and awareness of death and non-being.

Existential therapy has several phases of counseling. During the initial phase of counseling the therapist assists clients in identifying and clarifying their assumptions about the world. Clients are given the opportunity to define and question the way in which they perceive and make sense of their existence. Clients examine their values, beliefs, and assumptions to determine their validity. During the middle phase, clients are assisted in fully examining the source and authority of their present value system. This process of self-exploration typically leads to new insight and restructuring of values and attitudes. The final phase helps people take what they are learning about themselves and put it into action (Corey, 2016, p. 150).

In terms of mental health disorders, the application of existential therapy has been effectively applied to settings and diverse populations such as substance use, ethnic and racial, minorities, LGBTQ, and psychiatric inpatients. For people who are coping with grief, loss developmental crisis, confronting death, or facing a major life decision existential therapy is appropriate (Corey, 2016, p. 151). Substance use disorders are characterized by a problematic pattern of use of a substance or substances leading to impairments in health, social functions, and control over substance use. Substance use disorders are a cluster of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms indicating that the individual continues to use the substance despite

harmful consequences. Existential therapy is best designed as an invitation for clients to recognize the ways in which they are not living fully authentic lives and making choices that will lead to their becoming what they are capable of being. Moreover, it aims at helping clients face anxiety and engage in action that is based on the authentic purpose of creating a worthy existence (Corey, 2016, p. 146).

As I examined the main character Conrad in the film *Ordinary People*, he appeared to be a high school kid that continued to display ongoing symptoms of anxiety, low- self-esteem, worry, agitation, and disturbance when around people. These symptoms were highlighted in his hostility, inattention, aggression, and self-harming practices throughout the film. The film was able to capture these symptoms and behaviors in several instances toward his mother, swim teammates, father, and psychiatrist.

Conrad mentions having memories in the form of dreams that were unpleasant in multiple sessions. He pointed out how his memories of his brother's death caused his distress and intrusive thoughts. As his psychiatrist, this would prompt me to provide Conrad with insight into the personal responsibility and decision making his brother had on his own life. I would explain how understanding that would remove the guilt and fault he placed on himself. In that sessions in the film, he verbalizes how his brother was "screwing around in the thunderstorm" (Redford, 1980, 1:38:59). As his counselor, continuing to help him identify that his brother made decisions that Conrad could not control would be utilizing the phases of the theory. Moreover, in the film, Conrad meets with his psychiatrist and discusses his ongoing feud with his mother. During the session, Dr. Burger encourages Conrad to "forgive your mom and yourself" (Redford, 1980, 1:09:24). As a counselor applying the existential theory to his therapeutic session, highlighting

his self-awareness would allow him to understand the dynamic of his being disconnected from his mother and the role he plays in the continuity of his family function.

In my opinion, the application of this theory would be useful in terms of the interventions that are theorized as the necessary phases toward self-awareness in the personality of clients. Furthermore, when clients are dealing with suicidal ideations, homicidal ideations, and interpersonal relationships like Conrad, increasing the awareness of control that most people believe they do not have when dealing with those ideations.

## Reference

1. Corey, G. (2016). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning US.
2. Redford, R. (1980). *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprise.