

**Existential Therapy: of “Ordinary People”**

Leslie Bae

Mental Health Counseling, Alliance University

GCN.OA: Theories and Foundations

Dr. George J Ramos

March 3, 2023

Existential therapy was founded by Viktor Frankl who experienced unspeakable deaths of loved ones during the Nazi concentration camps but still sought joy in his existence and suffering. One always has a choice to find meaning and purpose no matter what the external circumstances are which is what Frankl coined logotherapy. It is how a person “understands his or her being and relationship to the world at large” (Corey, 2015. P. 136) and decides how to live out within the unchanging juxtapositions of life/death or freedom/responsibility. Personality is dependent on the ownership one has in “the courage to be who we are” (Corey, 2015. P. 140) and be fulfilled enough to be in relation with other people. Mental disorders are considered “existential neurosis or vacuum” when there is no meaning at all, or it is only about doing and not being. Anxiety is a natural motivator in life and therapists’ harness this with clients, but it becomes “neurotic anxiety” when it debilitates a client out of awareness.

Existential therapy would interpret that death and grief overtook Conrad’s life and possibly that his choice of suicide is understandable. Conrad had the freedom to evaluate his state of life, but it was inauthentic, “anchoring in someone else’s definition of them...seeking approval and confirmation of their being in others instead of looking to themselves for affirmation” (Corey, 2015. P. 139). It was as if he felt something real for the first time after his brother’s death whereas before he was floating through life in the superficial conversations and the doings of what everyone else did, such as be in the swim team. In the scene with his mother sitting in Jarret’s room, the conversation immediately went to weather and golf as if any real conversation about feelings was taboo (Redford, 1980, 0:27:45). Symbolically his mother closes the door as if to clearly indicate an end to anything deep and brings it back to new shirts she purchased. As Conrad digs deeper into himself, he quits the swim team, he distances himself

from the frat boy friends, and he yearns for real connections which is a sign that he is taking responsibility in freely becoming more of who he is.

As Dr. Burger, the I/Thou connection would be healing in it of itself because Conrad does not have a soundboard that he could try to figure out who he is and safely use as a soundboard, especially for something as painful as the death of Jarrett. Since there are no clearly defined techniques in existential therapy, it would be apt for Dr. Burger to make Conrad realize he is “not the victim of his past conditioning but can be the architect in redesigning his future” (Corey, 2015. P. 155). Conrad could be encouraged on his journey to shaping his identity as someone who is powerful and courageous to have chosen life and doing away with pleasing others and feeling what is real. In life and death, Conrad is still able to make fruitful connections, just as he reached out to Karen for “the laughs” (Redford, 1980, 0:39:18) or Shannon for “keeping it straight” (Redford, 1980, 1:46:59). The ultimate success is when Conrad admits, “I’ve been doing a lot of dumb things lately” (Redford, 1980, 1:46:55) which is truly taking a hold of his existence and freely choosing how/who to be thereafter.

Existential therapy is “appropriate for clients who are committed to dealing with problems about living for people who feel alienated from their current expectations of society, or for those who are searching for meaning in their lives” (Corey, 2015. P. 151). It would be safe to say Conrad would ground himself with a therapist who is true to themselves as a model for Conrad to do the same. The gently coaxing of “removing roadblocks to meaningful life” (Corey, 2015. P. 148) is what comes after all the hard work Conrad has done already in becoming his authentic self while meeting with Dr. Burger. Despite not having solid structure or technique, for Conrad who is just trying to understand the meaning of surviving, existential therapy could be a short-term treatment in the process of his self-discovery.

## References

Corey, Gerald. (2015). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy.*, Tenth Edition, Thompson Learning.

Redford, R. (Director), Schwary, R. (Producer), Guest, J. & Sargent, A. (Novel Writer & Screenplay Writer). (1980). *Ordinary People*. Paramount Pictures Corp.