

Existential Ordinary People Paper

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GCN 502: Theories and Foundations of Counseling

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March 14, 2023

Existential psychotherapy has been described as a way of thinking or an attitude about psychotherapy rather than a particular style of practicing psychotherapy. It is a philosophical approach that influences a counselor's therapeutic practice. Existential psychotherapy focuses on exploring topics such as mortality, meaning, freedom, creativity, love, responsibility, anxiety, and aloneness as these relate to a person's current struggle (Corey, 2015). This approach asks profound questions about the nature of the human being and despair, grief, isolation, and anomie. It deals centrally with the questions of meaning, creativity, and love. Clients are encouraged to reflect on life, recognize their options, and decide among them (Corey, 2015). Some of the common questions/sources of existential angst for clients are "Why am I here?", "What do I want from life?", "What gives my life purpose?" and "Where is the source of meaning for me in life?". The basic dimensions of the human condition, according to the existential approach, it includes the capacity for self-awareness, the tensions between freedom and responsibility, the creation of an identity, establishing meaningful relationships, the search for meaning, purpose, values, and goals, accepting anxiety as a condition of living, and the awareness of death and non-being.

Existential Psychotherapy is not technique oriented; however, techniques from other models can be used within the context of striving to understand the client's subjective world, but they must be used in an integrated fashion. When the deepest self of the therapist meets the deepest part of the client, the counseling process is at its best. The main character Conrad in the film *Ordinary People* (1980), experienced the tragic loss of his older brother Buck in a boat accident. Unfortunately, Conrad was present when the accident happened. Since then, Conrad has been deeply wounded emotionally and mentally and scarred and traumatized to the point of

attempting suicide. It was clear that Conrad was showing signs of survivor's guilt and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to being directly exposed to the traumatic event. Conrad's symptoms in the film were recurring nightmares and flashbacks, lack of motivation, sleep, and interest in normal activities, loss of appetite, difficulty focusing in class, and feeling isolated and alone.

The existential approach applies to Conrad through his relationship and interactions with his therapist (Dr. Burger). Conrad is trying to find purpose and meaning in his life again after losing his brother, followed by the attempt to end his life. Since Conrad was dealing with survivor's guilt, he wondered why he had still been alive and felt frustrated and tormented by the fact that he had survived the boat accident and his brother did not and that he couldn't save him. There is a scene in the film where Dr. Burger tells Conrad, "you're here, and you're alive," to which Conrad responds, "it doesn't feel good," and Dr. Burger goes on to say, "it is good, believe me." According to existential philosophy, Conrad was experiencing existential angst. Dr. Burger was trying to understand Conrad's subjective world while reassuring him that being alive was still better than whatever it was he was feeling or experiencing at that very moment. In the film, Conrad is also trying to figure out who he is and his identity in the world outside of living under his brother's shadow. I believe establishing meaningful relationships still mattered to Conrad because I could see that he still wanted to feel connected to his mother after coming out of a psychiatric hospital, and he began to see a therapist as well as build a close romantic relationship with a girl he had been friends with at the psychiatric hospital.

Existential therapy focuses on examining the essence of why life is significant and why it is worth living. As Conrad's therapist, this would be a very good approach to treating and dealing with Conrad's mental and emotional struggles as well as the trauma he endured.

Existentialists are known to have contributed a new dimension to the understanding of death, anxiety, guilt, frustration, loneliness, and alienation, which can all apply to Conrad. With the existential therapy approach, I can help Conrad face his fears and anxiety and engage in action based on creating a meaningful existence. More importantly, help Conrad reclaim and re-own his life; teaching him to listen to what he already knows about himself. After Conrad experiences such a traumatic event, it is crucial that he builds the skills and confidence to take charge of his own life again and understand that losing his brother doesn't mean his life is meaningless and insignificant or that he is doomed. This approach can also help Conrad identify ways he blocks himself from being fully present. The therapeutic process can also challenge Conrad to assume responsibility for creating his own present life.

References

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