

ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

5. EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

5.1. Existential Psychotherapy - Background

Existential psychotherapy is a philosophical method of therapy that operates on the belief that inner conflict within a person is due to that individual's confrontation with the givens of existence. These givens, as noted by Irvin D. Yalom, are: the inevitability of death, freedom and its attendant responsibility, existential isolation (referring to phenomenology), and finally meaninglessness. These four givens, also referred to as ultimate concerns, form the body of existential psychotherapy and compose the framework in which a therapist conceptualizes a client's problem in order to develop a method of treatment. In the British School of Existential therapy, these givens are seen as predictable tensions and paradoxes of the four dimensions of human existence, the physical, social, personal and spiritual realms.

The philosophers who are especially pertinent to the development of existential psychotherapy are those whose work is directly aimed at making sense of human existence. But the philosophical movements that are of most importance and that have been directly responsible for the generation of existential therapy are phenomenology and existential philosophy.

The starting point of existential philosophy can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the work of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both were in conflict with the predominant ideologies of their time and committed to the exploration of reality as it can be experienced in a passionate and personal manner.

Kierkegaard protested vigorously against popular misunderstanding and abuse of Christian dogma and the so-called 'objectivity' of science. He thought that both were ways of avoiding the anxiety inherent in human existence. He had great contempt for the way in which life was being lived by those around him and believed that truth could ultimately only be discovered subjectively by the individual in action. What was most lacking was people's courage to take the leap of faith and live with passion and commitment from the inward depth of existence. This involved a constant struggle between the finite and infinite aspects of our nature as part of the difficult task of creating a self and finding meaning. As

Kierkegaard lived by his own word he was lonely and much ridiculed during his lifetime.

Nietzsche took this philosophy of life a step further. His starting point was the notion that God is dead, that is, the idea of God was outmoded and limiting and that it is up to us to reevaluate existence in light of this. He invited people to release moral and societal constraint and to discover their free will in order to live according to their own desires, now the only maintainable law in his philosophy. He encouraged people to transcend the mores of civilization and choose their own standards. The important existential themes of freedom, choice, responsibility and courage are introduced for the first time.

While Kierkegaard and Nietzsche drew attention to the human issues that needed to be addressed, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology provided the method to address them in a rigorous manner. He contended that natural sciences are based on the assumption that subject and object are separate and that this kind of dualism can only lead to error. He proposed a whole new mode of investigation and understanding of the world and our experience of it. Prejudice has to be put aside or 'bracketed', in order for us to meet the world afresh and discover what is absolutely fundamental and only directly available to us through intuition. If people want to grasp the essence of things, instead of explaining and analyzing them, they have to learn to describe and understand them.

Martin Heidegger applied the phenomenological method to understanding the meaning of being. He argued that poetry and deep philosophical thinking can bring greater insight into what it means to be in the world than can be achieved through scientific knowledge. He explored human beings in the world in a manner that revolutionizes classical ideas about the self and psychology. He recognized the importance of time, space, death and human relatedness. He also favored hermeneutics, an old philosophical method of investigation, which is the art of interpretation. Unlike interpretation as practiced in psychoanalysis (which consists of referring a person's experience to a pre-established theoretical framework) this kind of interpretation seeks to understand how the person himself subjectively experiences something. Jean-Paul Sartre contributed many other strands of existential exploration, particularly in terms of emotions, imagination, and the person's insertion into a social and political world. The philosophy of existence on the contrary is carried by a wide-ranging literature, which includes many other authors than the ones mentioned above. Other existential authors include Karl Jaspers, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and Hans-Georg Gadamer within the Germanic tradition and Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice

Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Emmanuel Lévinas within the French tradition.

From the start of the 20th century some psychotherapists were, however, inspired by phenomenology and its possibilities for working with people. Otto Rank, an Austrian psychoanalyst who broke with Freud in the mid-1920s, was the first existential therapist. Ludwig Binswanger, in Switzerland, also attempted to bring existential insights to his work with patients, in the Kreuzlingen sanatorium where he was a psychiatrist. Much of his work was translated into English during the 1940s and 1950s and, together with the immigration to the USA of Paul Tillich and others, this had a considerable impact on the popularization of existential ideas as a basis for therapy. Rollo May played an important role in this, and his writing kept the existential influence alive in America, leading eventually to a specific formulation of therapy.

5.2. Existential Therapy's View of the Human Mind

Existential therapy starts with the belief that although humans are essentially alone in the world, they long to be connected to others. People want to have meaning in one another's lives, but ultimately they must come to realize that they cannot depend on others for validation, and with that realization they finally acknowledge and understand that they are fundamentally alone. The result of this revelation is anxiety in the knowledge that our validation must come from within and not from others.

Because there is no single existential view, opinions about psychological dysfunction vary. For theorists aligned with Yalom, psychological dysfunction results from the individual's refusal or inability to deal with the normal existential anxiety that comes from confronting life's "givens": mortality, isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom.

For other theorists, there is no such thing as psychological dysfunction or mental illness. Every way of being is merely an expression of how one chooses to live one's life. However, one may feel unable to come to terms with the anxiety of being alone in the world. If so, an existential psychotherapist can assist one in accepting these feelings rather than trying to change them as if there is something wrong. Everyone has the freedom to choose how they are going to be in life, however this may go unexercised because making changes is difficult; it may appear easier and safer not to make decisions that one will be responsible for.

Many people will remain unaware of alternative choices in life for various societal reasons.

Existentialism suggests that it is possible for people to face the anxieties of life head-on and embrace the human condition of aloneness, to revel in the freedom to choose and take full responsibility for their choices. They courageously take the helm of their lives and steer in whatever direction they choose; they have the courage to be. One does not need to arrest feelings of meaninglessness, but can choose new meanings for their lives. By building, loving, and creating, one is able to live life as one's own adventure. One can accept one's own mortality and overcome fear of death. He accepts his mortality and rejects the constrictions of society he previously placed on himself, leaving him unencumbered and free to live his life with an unclouded mind.

The strictly Sartrean perspective of existential psychotherapy is generally unconcerned with the client's past; instead, the emphasis is on the choices to be made in the present and future. The counselor and the client may reflect upon how the client has answered life's questions in the past, but attention ultimately shifts to searching for a new and increased awareness in the present and enabling a new freedom and responsibility to act. The patient can then accept they are not special, and that their existence is simply coincidental, without destiny or fate. By accepting this, they can overcome their anxieties, and instead view life as moments in which they are fundamentally free.

5.3. Four Worlds

Existential thinkers seek to avoid restrictive models that categorize or label people. Instead they look for the universals that can be observed cross-culturally. There is no existential personality theory which divides humanity into types or reduces people to part components. Instead, there is a description of the different levels of experience and existence with which people are inevitably confronted. The way in which a person is in the world at a particular stage can be charted on this general map of human existence. One can distinguish four basic dimensions of human existence: the physical, the social, the psychological, and the spiritual. On each of these dimensions, people encounter the world and shape their attitude out of their particular take on their experience. Their orientation towards the world defines their reality. The four dimensions are obviously interwoven and provide a complex four-dimensional force field for their existence. Individuals are stretched between a

positive pole of what they aspire to on each dimension and a negative pole of what they fear.

- 1. *Physical dimension***- On the physical dimension, individuals relate to their environment and to the givens of the natural world around them. This includes their attitude to the body they have, to the concrete surroundings they find themselves in, to the climate and the weather, to objects and material possessions, to the bodies of other people, their own bodily needs, to health and illness and to their own mortality. The struggle on this dimension is, in general terms, between the search for domination over the elements and natural law (as in technology, or in sports) and the need to accept the limitations of natural boundaries (as in ecology or old age). While people generally aim for security on this dimension (through health and wealth), much of life brings a gradual disillusionment and realization that such security can only be temporary. Recognizing limitations can bring great release of tension.
- 2. *Social dimension*** - On the social dimension, individuals relate to others as they interact with the public world around them. This dimension includes their response to the culture they live in, as well as to the class and race they belong to (and also those they do not belong to). Attitudes here range from love to hate and from cooperation to competition. The dynamic contradictions can be understood in terms of acceptance versus rejection or belonging versus isolation. Some people prefer to withdraw from the world of others as much as possible. Others blindly chase public acceptance by going along with the rules and fashions of the moment. Otherwise they try to rise above these by becoming trendsetters themselves. By acquiring fame or other forms of power, individuals can attain dominance over others temporarily. Sooner or later, however, everyone is confronted with both failure and aloneness.
- 3. *Psychological dimension*** - On the psychological dimension, individuals relate to themselves and in this way create a personal world. This dimension includes views about their own character, their past experience, and their future possibilities. Contradictions here are often experienced in terms of personal strengths and weaknesses. People search for a sense of identity, a feeling of being substantial and having a self. But inevitably many events will confront them with evidence to the contrary and plunge them into a state of confusion or disintegration. Activity and passivity are an important polarity here. Self-affirmation and resolution go with the former and surrender and yielding with the latter. Facing the final dissolution of self that

comes with personal loss and the facing of death might bring anxiety and confusion to many who have not yet given up their sense of self-importance.

4. ***Spiritual dimension*** - On the spiritual dimension, individuals relate to the unknown and thus create a sense of an ideal world, an ideology, and a philosophical outlook. It is here that they find meaning by putting all the pieces of the puzzle together for themselves. For some people, this is done by adhering to a religion or other prescriptive world view; for others, it is about discovering or attributing meaning in a more secular or personal way. The contradictions that must be faced on this dimension are often related to the tension between purpose and absurdity, hope and despair. People create their values in search of something that matters enough to live or die for, something that may even have ultimate and universal validity. Usually the aim is the conquest of a soul, or something that will substantially surpass mortality (as for instance in having contributed something valuable to humankind). Facing the void and the possibility of nothingness are the indispensable counterparts of this quest for the eternal.