



Existential Therapy's View of the Human Mind

Existential therapy starts with the belief that although humans are essentially alone in the world, we long to be connected to others. People want to have meaning in each others lives, but ultimately we must come to realise that we cannot depend on others for our validation, and with that realisation we finally acknowledge and understand that we 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 we are alienated and isolated our lives are also meaningless. Nothing exists which is greater than ourselves, therefore there are no external sources of values and absolutes from which we can draw. Taken to an extreme, we might conclude that there is nothing for which to live. However, we also possess the freedom to create our own values and personal life-meaning, and apply them to our condition. This freedom gives us feelings of significance and purpose that are strong enough to carry us through life. Still, the freedom to choose is another source of anxiety: we must summon the requisite strength and courage to choose our personal life-meaning and hold fast to it. This is undoubtedly a task which many find difficult.

Human beings are also mortal. As we come to grips with the fact that our lives are limited, we develop even more anxiety: we are afraid of death. The knowledge that at some point in the future we will cease to be, while frightening, is at the same time invigorating because it is relevant right now and makes our existence important. The juxtaposition of life and death is one thing that does give us some certainty. But it also creates tension. And human living is essentially about living with tension and conflict and finding a way to go beyond these, transforming the troubles of the past and the challenges of the present into the possibilities of the future.

Finally, humans are responsible. Being isolated, alone, and free to choose means that one cannot assign blame for his or her problems to someone else. The individual alone makes the choices and therefore is responsible for the outcomes. At any point we are free to make different choices and thus re-invent ourselves; we are at once the architect, the planner, and the builder of our lives, throughout our lives. Being able to choose is to be constantly in touch with one's potentiality. Often we find this too much of a burden and so we pretend we do not have a choice and are not responsible for what happens in our life and in the world. This is what Sartre called living in *bad faith*. (Sartre, 1943) He believed it was nearly impossible to live without such self deceptions.



Psychological Dysfunction

In the existential view, there is no such thing as psychological dysfunction or being ill. 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 you will be responsible for. Many people will remain unaware of alternative choices in life for various societal reasons.

The Good Life

Existential belief 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, by loving, and by creating one is able to live life as one's own adventure. One can accept one's own mortality and overcome fear of death. Though the French author Albert Camus denied the specific label of existentialist, in his novel, *L'Etranger*, his main character Meursault, ends the novel by doing just this. 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. *[citation needed]*

Existential Therapy

The existential psychotherapist is not overly concerned with the client's past, although a working knowledge of your past can be helpful; instead, the emphasis is on the choices to be made in the present and future. The counsellor 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.