

# Existential approach to individual therapy



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To begin, there have been many approaches to group therapy. Some recently discussed approaches include the Psychoanalytic approach founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Adlerian approach founded by Alfred Adler (1870-1937), and the psychodrama approach to group therapy founded by Moreno, Moreno, & Blatner (1930) as stated by Corey (2016). The Existential approach was founded by Irvin Yalom (1931). According to Corey (2016), Yalom was born in the poor inner city of Washington, D. C. where he preferred to read fictional novels instead of playing outside. Corey (2016) states that Yalom enjoyed reading the fictional novels so much that he decided that it would be very accomplishing if he wrote his own novel. From that moment, Yalom has produced many novels including *Momma and the Meaning of Life* (2000) and *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (1970/2005). Furthermore, Corey (2016) states that Yalom advocates using the here and now and bases his belief of existential therapy on the meaning of life, the role of death, and self-awareness in therapeutic work.

Although Irvin Yalom has previously discussed existential therapy as a therapeutic approach to individual therapy, Corey (2016) brings forth Yalom's therapeutic approach to existential therapy for group settings as well. What is existential therapy? In defining existential therapy, one must first understand the meaning of the word existential. Gerald Corey (2016) best states that the existential approach influences a counselor's therapeutic practice that focuses on key concepts such as meaning of life, freedom, self-awareness, self-determination, personal responsibility, anxiety, aloneness, authenticity, and death while assisting clients in exploring the existential “

givens of life” or existence. It further states that this approach helps individuals regain control over his/her life by acknowledging those existing concerns that are affecting his/her ability to live an effective and productive lifestyle.

The existential approach is especially useful when in a group setting that yields existential concerns from different group members (Corey, 2016). As a counselor or group leader, you may have a counseling group consisting of individuals who are struggling with handling different existential concerns or issues in their life at the time. One group member may be struggling with overcoming the death of a close family member or companion. One member of the group may be trying to search for meaning in his/her own life. Another member may be suffering from loneliness or isolation. However, the existential approach will be able to assist each group member’s individual concerns by acknowledging the key concepts of the existential approach as mentioned earlier. Corey (2016) states that the existential approach is based on the belief that we as individuals are free and responsible for our own actions, behaviors, and choices in life. In counseling individuals in group therapy using the existential therapeutic approach, the goal is to assist each individual as they try to develop a sense of understanding to their existential givens of life or concerns as a human. As the counselor, we are here to help the clients realize that no one has control over their lives except themselves. The counselor helps the clients understand that he or she has control and is able to guide themselves in the direction that he or she wants to go.

According to Schneider and Krug (2010), as stated by Corey (2016), the existentialist is present to help guide the client in the direction of the path

the client chooses to pursue by helping the client reclaim and regain control of their own life. In assisting the client in reclaiming their control, Schneider and Krug identified four essential aims of existential therapy, which are: (1) help clients become present to self and others; (2) help clients realize when they are not reaching their full potential of their own presence; (3) help clients assume responsibility for their own life; and (4) encourage clients to choose more expanded ways of being in their current life. Bohart & Wade (2013), as mentioned in Corey, states that clients in group therapy are co-authors of therapy, meaning the group members have say so in the direction they want therapy to go. The beliefs, expectations, and group members' motivations are influential in the outcome of therapy.

In addition to Yalom (1931), Corey (2016) states that there were other cofounders who contributed to the existential theory. Those individuals are Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who is considered the founder of existential philosophy, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Rollo May (1981), and James Bugental (1987). Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish Philosopher who believed that anxiety is how we as human learn to be ourselves. Kierkegaard also believed that human should be encouraged to take risks and have faith in making sound choices for ourselves. Heidegger (1889-1976) states that we as human need to remember that we exist in the world and are not just a part of the world. We as human need to live in the real world and acknowledge our authentic selves, in other words, be real with ourselves. Sartre (1905-1980) believed that we as human are free to choose what we are and how we want to live. We choose our own values. We as human tend to not be able to express our freedom so we make excuses

and blame our imperfection and inability to express and control ourselves on our condition, illness, or past experiences. Sartre states that no matter what we have been through or the experiences that we have overcome or attempted to move past, whether good or bad, we are able to make choices and become something different. As addressed by Corey, James Bugental (1987) and Emmy van Deurzen (2012) were significant contributors to the development of existential therapy. Corey states that Bugental introduced life changing psychotherapy which helped clients recognize ways in which they have addressed life's existential questions and analyze how they addressed their issues so that they can live a more authentic life. Bugental analyzed clients' authenticity during therapy and in real life settings. The British contributor, Deurzen (2012), recognized through client-therapist interactions that clients are resilient and intelligent in the sense of being able to overcome problems and obstacles in their life. Deurzen recognized that her clients did not allow their past issues or hardships define them as a person but found meaning behind their issues and concerns. Clients acknowledge what is most important to them in life.

Now with giving a little insight on the thoughts and perceptions of the founders and co-contributors of existentialism, Corey explains the purpose of an existential group. When in group therapy, the counselor or group leader wants the clients or participants to view the group setting as the world in which they operate and function by discovering who they are and the purpose they serve while sharing existential concerns whether personal or impersonal. Participants interacting with one another in group therapy will eventually focus on the here and now (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). Through

participants' self-exploration in group therapy, Deurzen (2012) defined these goals as follows: (1) members become authentic with themselves, (2) members' perspective of themselves and the world is broadened, (3) clarification of members' meaning to present and future life, (4) come to terms with past, present, and future crises, and (5) understand themselves and others better through effective communication. According to Sharp & Bugental (2001), as stated in Corey, the therapeutic process in existential group therapy focuses attention towards clients finding meaning and purpose within themselves. Members are encouraged to listen to themselves and become more aware of their experiences in life by acknowledging a more openness to life and themselves. Individuals in group therapy start to feel belonged and as a part of individuals who are promoting togetherness amongst one another, providing comfort, sharing existential concerns and a sense that the individual is not alone.

The current focus of existential approach to group therapy is to direct attention to the individuals' experiences of overcoming anxiety related to being alone in the world, regaining control over one's life, and searching for meaning (Corey, 2016). Through exploration of this focus, Corey mentions key concepts of the approach which include self-awareness, self-determination, freedom, and personal responsibility, existential anxiety, death and nonbeing, the search for meaning, the search for authenticity, and aloneness and relatedness. When discussing the human expansion of self-awareness, we think about freedom, choice, and responsibility for self. As an individual's awareness increases, authenticity increases. Individuals realize that they are able to make new decisions regardless of past experiences

and/ or decisions. By learning from the past, everyone is capable of changing and developing their own future (Corey, 2016). Also, Corey mentions that existential group therapy allows individuals to discover their uniqueness in the world by helping them define who they are and become aware of their existence. Increasing awareness in individuals help them to openly express their own unique feelings and views in their world. When expressing feelings and concerns, individuals may be confronted by other group members, which may cause great deals of anxiety especially if an individual is just beginning to open up and acknowledge existence for themselves. However, Corey (2016) believes that anxiety helps individualize an individual by making them aware of the inauthentic self that others may want the individual to be. Bringing self-awareness to individuals allows them recognize that they can make choices for themselves (Corey, 2016). As practicing counselors, we tend to become involved with different clients and families where we may be live that the individual is in counseling involuntarily. We may have children who are seeking counseling because someone such as a parent or guardian told them to. These individuals have not become aware of self because if they were, then they would know that they have a choice whether to be in therapy or not. Some may ask if an individual who has been court ordered to attend 12 group therapy sessions has the choice to attend therapy. The answer is yes. Even though the individual is court ordered to attend sessions, that individual still has a choice. Now the choice may be to attend therapy and have an incident expunged from his record or not attend the sessions and be in contempt of court. However, the individual still has a choice.

The next key concept that Corey (2016) mentions is self-determination, freedom, and personal responsibility. Individuals are able to assume responsibility for their actions in order to live an authentic lifestyle. Schneider & Krug (2010), as explained in Corey (2016), stated three values that existential therapy embraces: freedom to become, capacity to reflect, and the capacity to act. Viktor Frankl (1963) suggests that there is a connection between freedom and responsibility. Freedom implies that we are responsible for our lives, for our actions, and for our failures to take action. Once we realize and understand that our lives are freely controlled by ourselves, we begin to increase authenticity, meaning we begin to become true to ourselves and begin to live under our own control. We have the capability to be who we are despite existential factors that may try to hinder our being (Frankl, 1963). Corey (2016) described Frankl's upbringing in which he stated that Frankl where he was part of a German concentration camp where he was a prisoner with no outside freedom. Frankl believed that even then, he made the choice to take control of his own life vowing that he would not choose to suffer. Frankl believed that freedom is not related to the freedom of the conditions or circumstances that present itself but how an individual stand against those conditions or circumstances. We are the change that is waiting to happen. If we wait until others tell us what to do or until the environment or society tells us which way to go, then we would only be bringing more misery and hopelessness to ourselves (Frankl, 1963). Individuals are to become aware of the roles that they have in their own life and once they come to the realization that they can make their own choices and decisions, they will resume control of their life and being. Yalom & Josselson (2014) state it best that once an individual in group therapy begin

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to openly express themselves to other group members, that individual will begin to see themselves through the eyes of others by learning how their behaviors affect themselves and others.

Another key concept that Corey (2016) mentions pertains to the clients accepting anxiety as a condition of life. Many of the existentialist mentioned early on state that anxiety is an aspect of human life and is unavoidable. Anxiety arises existentially as a result of being confronted by the givens of life. Vontress (2013) and Yalom (1980) present givens of life to be death, freedom, choice, isolation, and meaninglessness. Deurzen (2012), as stated in Corey (2016) explains existential anxiety to be the basic unease that we experience when we become aware of our vulnerability and our inevitable death. Thinking about the givens of life causes many individuals to have a great amount of anxiety, however, individuals still have the ability to overcome this anxiety through therapy and being able to recognize and acknowledge what he/she can do in order to overcome this anxiety and determine what may be causing this anxiety. Therapist distinguish between normal anxiety and neurotic anxiety. Corey describes normal anxiety as an appropriate response to an event being faced in which freedom is accepted and responsibility is accepted for actions made. Individuals are faced with choices without clear guidelines or knowing the outcome. Neurotic anxiety is said to result when a client fails to move through anxiety related to concrete things that are out of proportion to the situation immobilizing the person (Deurzen, 2012).

The next concept Corey describes is death and nonbeing. Corey (2016) states that in order for an individual to discover meaning and purpose in life, <https://assignbuster.com/existensial-approach-to-individual-therapy/>

that individual must acknowledge that death is essential to life and acknowledgment of death will allow the individual to live. It is said that death should not be viewed as a bad thing but if it is acknowledged and individuals realize that death is a part of life then human will start to appreciate life more. Recognizing that everyone is going to die one day will teach the person to live fully. Think about death as you would about life. Clients can use their awareness and acceptance of death as a way to view whether or not he or she is living life fully. Frankl (1963) believes that the length of our time on earth is not as important as how we live our life which will determine the meaning and quality of the life we live. Many are afraid and get great anxiety when thinking about death or dying. Individuals forget to continue living life when thinking about death, but until an individual realizes and comes to the actualization and awareness of self that one day he or she is going to die, life will never be lived fully. That individual will spend the rest of life worrying, searching for meaning and isolating themselves from reality or their authentic self. Corey mentions asking the group to ask themselves how they feel about the quality of their life. Then to question the group with the same question only to answer that question as if they knew that they were about to die. By asking these questions, the client will be able to reflect upon their life to see if they have really been living their life to the fullest. Some individuals may state that they wish they could have done this or that now that they know that they are dying which signifies that they have not been living life to the fullest and being their authentic self.

What is meant by the search for meaning? Another concept of existential approach is helping clients discover their meaning in life. Existential therapy

helps clients challenge the meaning in their life. The counselor aides in assisting clients to find meaning to their life by asking questions such as “ Do you like the direction of your life?” “ Are you leased with what you now are and what you are becoming?” “ If you are confused about who you are and what you want for yourself, what are you doing to get some clarity?” “ What gives your life purpose and meaning?” (Corey, 2016). Viktor Frankl (1963) mentioned that a main reason for stress and anxiety in human nature is due to lack of meaning, viewing existential neurosis as the experience of meaningless leading to emptiness and hollowness known as the existential vacuum. Frankl (1963) also invented logotherapy to help clients find meaning to their life. Frankl explains that even through suffering a pain, an individual is capable of finding meaning in life. It is not the responsibility of the counselor or therapist to tell the client what they should do or what their life should be. The therapist or counselor is there to support and encourage the client to develop his or her own meaning of life for themselves. With the support of the group, participants are able to develop a value system that is consistent with their meaning of life and not conformed to the being of others (Corey, 2016).

When speaking about authenticity and becoming one's own self, Corey explains that existential group therapy is beneficial in helping individuals view oneself and believe in their own belief without reflecting what others think. There may be many suggestions and conversation about what direction a person should take or how an individual may handle a particular problem, however, it is up to the individual to decide what they would want to do or how they would like to handle a particular situation. Group

counseling helps individuals sort out who they are and allows individuals to come to a full appreciation of themselves in relation to others in the group setting (Corey, 2016).

Corey (2016) describes existential isolation as being our aloneness in the universe. Each individual would like to create his or her own identity, however, in doing so, we as human tend to connect with others as well. Aloneness and isolation are pertinent factors that can hinder an individual from being able to connect with others while trying to identify with themselves. What individuals fail to realize is that when they are trying to connect with others while searching for answers for themselves, the individual tends to inherit the beliefs and values of others causing the individual to fall into the stigma of society and how the society perceives human to be. This causes the individual to not be true to themselves or authentic but subjective to what others expect or suppose is expected (Corey, 2016). In the text, Corey explained the courage to be, the experience of aloneness, experience of relatedness, and struggles with our identity in unmasking who we are as human beings. As counselors, we are expected to assist our clients with building courage to acknowledge their existence and being in the world no matter how difficult or scary it may be. Corey states that aloneness is part of human experience and in order to overcome this sense of aloneness, the individual has to come to realization that he or she cannot depend on anyone else other than themselves to find meaning to their life and acknowledge how he or she will live. The client must be able to stand alone before he or she can team up with another individual(s). It is the client's challenge to learn to build that rapport with themselves before

building relationships with someone else. Find out and get to know yourself before entering into someone else's world or allowing someone else to control your world. We as human feel that we need to be a part of a relationship other than with ourselves. We feel that we need to help others before helping ourselves. We become trapped in a doing mode rather than being mode (Farha, 1994). As the counselor, we are there to help clients realize that they have lost their identity through allowing others to control and have the say so of what is and what should be of their life. Counselors allow clients the opportunity to now find their own answers and solutions to their problems.

In addressing the roles and functions of the group leader, we focus on the main role of the group leader, according to Bugental (1997), is to increase awareness to group members individually. Corey (2016) states that the primary role of the group leader, when relating to encouraging cohesion in the group, is to foster meaningful relationships amongst members of the group by having each member openly discuss existential concerns while other members interact and give feedback so that concerns can be fully explored. Existential therapists value authenticity and use of self disclosure to help build therapeutic relationships with group members. Group leaders encourage members to assess restrictions on their own freedom, reflect on increasing choices, and take responsibility for their choices. Existential therapists help clients reflect on situations in their present life, face what happens, and think for themselves without depending on the thoughts and expectations of others.

According to Corey (2016), the existential approach does not focus on techniques to incorporate with clients as does other approaches that have been mentioned before. Emphasis is on understanding the client in the present moment. May (1983) states that in order to be able to incorporate techniques with clients in therapy, you must show understanding of the client in his or her subjective world. Encounter and dialogue between client and therapist are what heals the client, not theories and techniques (Elkins, 2007). Clients are encouraged to face their concerns and difficulties rather avoid and go around them. Although there is no specific technique(s) for existential therapy, existentialist use a variety of techniques and interventions from various therapeutic approaches (Deurzen & Adams, 2011). In addition to Deurzen (2011) stating that the existential approach does not have a specific technique to incorporate in therapy, she mentions, as stated by Corey (2016), that silence, questions, and making interpretations are some interventions suggested. Corey also mentions three phases of existential therapy: initial phase, middle phase, and final phase. During the initial phase, clients identify and clarify beliefs, values, and assumptions. Middle phase is when clients are involved in self-exploration causing them to restructure attitudes and values of self. The final phase is where clients are instructed to now use all they have learned and put skills and learned information into action.

Strengths to existential therapy in group is its focus on spirituality and meaning of life (Corey, 2016). The greatest peace of mind comes from individuals listening to themselves and finding authenticity of their lives (Vontress, 2013). Limitations to this approach to group therapy include it

being useless for individuals who do not want to find meaning and existence to their life; those who are seeking problem-solving methods; and those who looking for someone to direct them in the direction to go in life.

Recent studies of a therapeutic group of white British elderly individuals was conducted to examine how existential therapy helps elderly in their transition to retirement. It was concluded that majority of the elderly found comfort in the group therapy as well as began to find meaning to oneself and enjoyed and appreciated the help and insight they received from interactions within the group from members. One member, however, discontinued sessions with the therapy because she was unable to find a connection or build rapport with the therapist. Another study described the togetherness that arrived between a group of Latinas who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The study indicated that the women were feeling as if they were alone and had no sense of self before therapy.

To conclude, Corey (2016) states that existential group therapy focuses on individuals finding meaning and authenticity of their own life. It focuses on four given of human life which are death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). As the counselor, we are here to encourage and help the client regain control over his or her own life. Counselor helps the client realize that he or she has the freedom, ability, and control to take over their life while being given insight and support from those individuals in the group setting (Corey, 2016).

## Works Cited

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