

Cognitive therapy versus existential psychotherapy



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The purpose of this reaction paper is to make a comparison and contrasting view between cognitive therapy and existential psychotherapy. Also to analyze how the main aspects of the psychotherapies are similar and how they differ. According to Corsini and Wedding (2008), cognitive therapy is based on a theory of personality that sustain that people act in response to life events through a mix of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral responses (p. 263). Cognitive therapy, as developed by Aaron T. Beck, relatively different from other types of therapies for instance the behavioral psychotherapy and psychoanalytic since it was established on information processing form of human behavior and psychopathology and not on a motivational or instinctual model.

Cognitive therapy intends to adjust information processing and start positive change in all systems by acting through cognitive system. This is a two-way process between the therapist and patient to study and examine the patient's beliefs about him or herself as well other people and the world (Corsini et al., 2008). Since the innovative work of Beck, numerous cognitive or cognitive behavioral therapies have emerged and these fluctuate in terms of their fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, and causal mechanisms. Other than the collaborative relationship between therapist and patient, cognitive behavioral therapies have other features such as the importance on disturbances in cognitive processes as the main factor in psychological distress; the understanding that the person's own cognitive activity can be accessed and reported; the understanding that cognition affects behavior thus that behavior can be therapeutically modified or changed throughout efforts to change cognitions.

Corsini et al., (2008) stated that existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to experience, relating forces in conflict and motion (p. 298). In other words, existential psychotherapy is designed to be adaptive to the person's desires, needs, and values. The essence of existential therapy, as the name imply, is apprehensive with human existence, and also look for ways to help individuals cope with situations. As it originates from existential philosophy, it focus on promoting better health by increasing conscious awareness and focusing on the spiritual and psychological worthlessness which many of us in the mental health field see as being prevalent in today's society. Other than trying to change individuals, it helps them to find out who they are and to find their own meaning and truth in an existence which is fragile and transitory.

According to Corsini et al., (2008), existential therapy implies and suggests a method of being that concerns itself with topics such as responsibility, freedom, meaning and death, contingency and time, imagination and spirit, joy and despair (p. 297). In every person exists the possibility of certain potentials and limitations which come merely by being a human. Existential therapy's focal point is on developing the self- awareness that the person need in order to meet his or her potential, at the same time as dealing with the internal conflicts or issues that arises concerning the predictability of death, freedom and the responsibility, meaningless and existential isolation.

As I always say in my meditation groups, people often are so busy getting on their lives that they eventually " train" their minds to be busy having little to no time to think about the fundamental meaning of life or just to connect with their inner self. It is not until suddenly the find themselves facing a

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tragic loss of someone, or a moment of great uncertainty that they start questioning or try to understand what life is all about. And then, they try to reinvent themselves to compensate for their feeling of emptiness which produces a deep sense of anxiety.

Existential therapy can be used to treat a broad number of different of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, phobias, and relationship problems. Since the majority of the problems arise from the basic human condition, they might show themselves as a result of unacceptable circumstances in life, existential therapy or approach could also be used to treat people suffering from trauma and abuse.

Existential therapy is considered as a philosophical approach which differs from cognitive behavioral therapy which consists of well defined techniques. Existential therapy stresses the basic conditions of human existence such as freedom as responsibility, as previously discussed, to shape the person's life and self- determination. Cognitive behavioral therapy on the other hand is a practical approach that seeks to define specific goals and utilize active methods to reach them.

According to Hickes and Daniel (2010), some existential therapists have a strong position against cognitive behavioral therapy as they seem to have philosophical and emotional objections to specific aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy first wake practice. Without thorough mutual and open exploration of all that it is, cognitive behavioral therapy seems relatively alien to the fundamental principles of the existential tradition.

Although this writer believes there are more differences than similarities between cognitive behavioral therapy and existential psychotherapy, one of the similarities is that both approaches have a structured collaboration between therapist and client and often call for homework. Both approaches also encourage clients to face their issues head on and start making their own decisions as well as to focus more on the future rather than their past. Another similarity between cognitive behavior therapy and existential psychotherapy is that they acknowledge the choice of the person in creating and changing his or her worldview. Regardless of the apparently technique driven approach to reframing and redirecting the person's thoughts consequently the feelings and behaviors, cognitive behavior therapy also has the potential to empower the person to perceive his or her own creation.

According to Hickes and Daniel (2010), cognitive behavior therapy has become one of the leading forms of psychotherapy because its foundation in quantitative research offers an confirmation base for claims of therapeutic effectiveness that are especially valued by the medical community. The traditional way or first wave of cognitive therapy has based itself on the psychiatric model and the classification of symptoms to diagnose a psychological disorder and effect treatment intended to reduce or eliminate the person's psychological distress. The focal point is on change and action orientation based on the therapeutic relationship and the belief that patient possesses on both rational and irrational beliefs. Cognitive therapy is based in a cognitive theory of behavior that was developed and updated through quantitative scientific research. It was until the appearance of second and

third wave treatments that the emotions of the clients were primarily considered only in the perspective of their cognitive relevance.

Existential psychotherapy in contrast gives attention to the outside of the regulatory process. Its direction is not grounded in a causal theory or methodology, choosing to use phenomenology and hermeneutic exploration to draw out and make explicit what is implicit. The therapist helps the client in owning, understanding and discovering meaning and insight within their life in perspective of the existence. It is also focused with helping the person make sense of their subjective experience of interacting with others, their moods, beliefs and attitudes, and how they feel about things (Hickes & Daniel, 2010). According to Corsini et al., (2008), existential psychotherapy has less in common with cognitive behavioral approaches that are deficient in the subtleties of the dynamic schools of thought. Even though there is an essential truth of these systems, each, from the existential standpoint, oversimplifies human consciousness and experience (p. 298).

As a psychotherapist I understand that existential and cognitive approaches, if used properly, could complement each other. While existential approach to psychotherapy is a comprehensive exploration of the meaning of life at the same time that is enhancing the person self- knowledge. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps the person see how his or her thoughts and behavior are related to the way the person feel. Combining these two approaches in psychotherapy can provide a safe place for the client to explore his or her thoughts, feelings, and emotions and how these affect the behavior in a non- judgmental environment. The therapist intentions is to lead the person or client through a journey of self discovery and

understanding at the same time as clarifying the person's life circumstances and where he or she want to be in life. By examining the way the person is thinking, he or she will be able to reflect on the assumptions and beliefs and therefore analyze if there are other ways of viewing things.

By combining existential and cognitive behavioral therapies the therapist also should encourage the person to explore the issues, conflicts and contradictions in his or her life. Consequently, the person will gain new ways and perspectives to enable him/her to assess the options and find the means to move forward in life. Ultimately, it is important to discuss that by combining the above mentioned approaches and have a successful outcome; the therapist needs to treat people's emotional struggles and discomfort by helping them find meaning in their lives and staying away from applying external objectives criteria and schemas. The aim is to analyze the struggles the person put in his or her life and modify or change the behavior in a meaningful context. By making sense of things the person will be able to participate in the activities he or she once enjoyed.