The Use of Metaphors as Therapeutic Interventions

Let me start our discussion on the Existential approach to counselling by inviting you to reflect on the use of metaphors as therapeutic interventions. In his article, **Das** (1998) offers some practical ideas for interventions used in logotherapy that may fall under the category of metaphoric or symbolic interventions. For example, when working with a client who has difficulties in prioritizing or identifying some meaningful goals in life, it may be quite effective to remind the client of the proverb/saying: "Do not stand among flowers and water the weeds" (Das, 1998, p. 208). Other metaphorical interventions can be: art therapy techniques, guided imagery, use of symbols.

**Would you be inclined to use such interventions in your counselling practice? Can you think of more examples?**

**Week Five Reading**

**Introduction**

Unlike many other theories, Existentialism is not the invention of one person and it is not a technique but rather a theoretical basis for resolving problems. Existential psychotherapy focuses on the human condition and asks deep questions about the nature of anxiety, isolation, loneliness, despair and grief. Existential psychotherapy originally developed in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s and is strongly anchored in phenomenological philosophy. The focus of this lesson will be, of course, on the existential approach to counselling and psychotherapy; but, for those of you who are interested in the philosophical foundations of existentialism, the book by Cooper (1999) is an excellent introduction.

The philosophical roots of Existentialism are to be found in the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Husserl and the phenomenologists. Historically, existential therapy began when Binswanger attempted to use Heidegger's theory therapeutically, an approach that was adapted by Victor Frankl, Rollo May, and others in the United States. More recently, its leading exponents have included Ernesto Spinelli and Emmy van Deurzen in the UK, and Irvin D. Yalom and James Bugental in the United States. In the UK, there is a growing number of existentially-oriented therapists. The School of Psychotherapy based in Regent's College in Regent's Park, London and the New School of Psychotherapy near Waterloo, London both specialize in the training of existential therapists and counsellors. [**The Society for Existential Analysis**](http://www.existentialanalysis.co.uk/) is a thriving international organisation, which promotes the discussion of existential ideas and their application to psychotherapy.

**Objectives**

Upon completion of this lesson you should:

* understand the key concepts of the Existential approach;
* be able to outline the therapeutic process in terms of the role of the therapist, the client's experience, and the relationship between the two;
* critically examine your own values and attitudes in relation to the concepts of *meaning of life*, *death and dying*, *anxiety and guilt*, and *freedom and responsibility*.

**Required Readings**

The text reading for this lesson is Chapter 9 of *Current Psychotherapies*, Corsini and Wedding (2011).

[**Das (1998)**](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=776921&site=ehost-live)

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=776921&site=ehost-live>

[**Epp (1998)**](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=412477&site=ehost-live)

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=412477&site=ehost-live>

Read the chapter before you begin to work on the lesson in order to get an overview of the theory. Supplement the material in your textbook by reading the articles by [**Das (1998)**](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=776921&site=ehost-live) and [**Epp (1998)**](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=412477&site=ehost-live). Re-read the chapter as you begin to work on the concepts.

**Basic Concepts**

After you have read Chapter 9, begin to work on the meanings of the concepts. As Mendelowitz and Schneider (2008) address each of the concepts, write down your own definitions. Check your own understanding of these terms against the definitions provided in your readings or in the online Glossary.

* Existential anxiety
* Existential guilt
* Existential vacuum (sense of valuelessness)
* Being-in-the-world
* Eigenwelt
* Mitwelt
* Umwelt
* Authenticity
* Freedom with responsibility
* Alienation
* Meaninglessness
* Self determination

**Basic Assumptions**

Existentialists believe that we have a capacity for self-awareness. Because we are free beings, we must accept the responsibility that accompanies our freedom. We are also constantly striving for identity and relationships to others. In our search for meaning, anxiety becomes a part of the human condition. Death gives significance to living so that, once we have normalized and integrated our fear of dying, we can begin to live fully.

**Causation**

*Heredity vs. Environment*. According to existentialist theory, the drive for self-actualization is indeed innate in all humans. We inherit the need to actualize fully our *being-in-the-world*. Existential psychotherapy recognizes the interplay of three modes of world in personality development: *Umwelt*, the world around or the environment, the biological world; *Mitwelt*, the interpersonal world of contact with other fellow human beings; and *Eigenwelt*, one's own world, the relationship with oneself.

*Cognitions*. Our perceptions relate to our awareness of others, self-awareness, awareness of death, and non-being. We choose our actions and create our own destinies and we choose to become what we can capably be. Existentialists would contend that reason is only one source of understanding life. It is not capable of providing all the answers.

*Motivation*. Existentialists follow the self-actualization model. People make choices in their journey towards self-fulfillment.

**Time Orientation**

The existential approach to counselling places a strong emphasis on the present (here-and-now) and helps clients make sense and derive meaning out of current or past sources of suffering.

**View of Human Nature**

Existentialists have an optimistic view of human nature. We are free to choose. Given the right opportunities, we can find values and meaning in our existence. We have the capacity for expanding our self-awareness and the capacity to comprehend our own death. We are born with the potentiality to be fully human and find meaning in our own existence.

**Preference for Explanations**

*Holistic vs. Atomistic*: The theory adopts a holistic approach by conceptualizing the individual as a whole person and exploring all three levels of the experience of being-in-the-world (Eigenwelt, Mitwelt, and Umwelt).

*External vs. Internal Determinants*: Existential psychotherapy focuses on internal determinants and places heavy emphasis on the individual's search for meaning in life.

*Nomothetic vs. Idiographic*: Existentialism emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual in his or her ability to choose what his or her existence will mean. Each individual is engaged in a subjective experience of being-in-the-world.

*Longitudinal vs. Cross Sectional*: The theory is interested in looking at an individual at a point in time. We know the individual on the basis of the choices he or she makes at the moment rather than his or her past history.

*Tension Production vs. Tension Reduction*: This is a tension production model. We go to great lengths to find meaning in our lives. In therapy, clients often face and explore feelings of isolation, dread, loneliness, or guilt.

*Observer Frame of Reference*: In existential counselling, the observer's frame of reference is an internal one: the therapist tries to look at the client's experience through the eyes of the client. The I/thou relationship is emphasized.

**Bases for Inference**

Prediction of behaviour is not emphasized in existential psychotherapy. The theory concerns itself with the uniqueness of the individual.

**Bases for Psychopathology**

Pathology may be the result of the following:

* failure to actualize one's potential (existential guilt);
* failure to confront fear of the unknown;
* lack of authenticity and the perception of differences between what one is and what one ought to be;
* meaninglessness;
* experience of nothingness and concern with death and dread;
* lack of engagement in or denial of any of the levels of being-in-the-world: *Eigenwelt* (the inner world of self), *Mitwelt* (the interpersonal world), and *Umwelt* (the biological and physical aspects of experience).

**Bases for Healthy Personality**

Existentialists consider that a healthy individual is constantly engaged in a creative search for meaning in life. This approach emphasizes authentic living, responsibility, and the courage to choose. Healthy individuals accept the inevitability of death and are able to remain open towards nature, towards others, and towards themselves.

**Role of the Therapist**

The existential counsellor is one who listens, empathises, and, through mutually experiencing the moment with the client, helps the client to a greater understanding of his or her life. The I/thou relationship encounter is stressed. The therapist models authenticity and a strong sense of responsibility.

**Implications For the Helping Relationship**

Existential therapy encourages clients to reflect on their own existence. Attention is given to the client's genuine investment in the counselling process.

**Goals of Helping**

The goal for existential counselling is to help clients find purpose or meaning in life and realize their full potential for responsibility, freedom, creativity, and self-awareness.

**Techniques or Methods**

The existential approach to theory is notorious for its disinterest in "techniques". Instead, it relies on providing understanding and caring in the context of a genuine therapeutic relationship to the client. However, Viktor Frankl was known to use paradoxical intention, as well as humour, in order to help clients challenge their inauthentic ways of relating to life's experiences. Existential therapists do not prescribe homework; such a technique would be viewed as curtailing the client's sense of responsibility and free choice. Self-awareness is stressed over action.

**Learning Activities**

1. Reflect on your own experience of being-in-the-world and describe your own personality in terms of *Umwelt* (the biological and physical aspects of your life experience, including your relation to nature and your physical environment), *Mitwelt* (your interpersonal world and social environment), and *Eigenwelt* (your inner world of thoughts and feelings).
2. In what way can your experience of being-in-the-world inform and bias your role as a counsellor?
3. Visit the website of the Society for Existential Analysis - London (see link below) and browse through the range of informative articles and comments posted on that site.

**Study Questions:**

1. How are the concepts of freedom and responsibility related in existential psychotherapy?
2. What is meant by *logotherapy*?
3. Based on your reading of the article by Das (1998), describe the four-step procedure for logotherapy proposed by Viktor Frankl.
4. Elaborate on Vontress's statement according to which "the existential counselor is the facilitator of self-reflection in the pursuit of better living" (Epp, 1998).
5. Explain the statement: "Techniques of therapy are secondary to the primary purpose of understanding the client".

**References:**

Cooper, D. E. (1999). *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (2nd edition). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Das, A. K. (1998). Frankl and the realm of meaning. *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development, 36*(4), 199-212.

Epp, L. R. (1998). The courage to be an existential counselor: An interview with Clemmont E. Vontress. *Journal of Menatl Health Counseling, 20*, 1-13.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

**Useful Links:**

Society for Existential Analysis - London, England, Website: [**http://www.existentialanalysis.co.uk/**](http://www.existentialanalysis.co.uk/)