

What is Existential Psychotherapy?

Philosophy as an approach to living



By: Ben Thornhill

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem...Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." Albert Camus.

Existential Psychotherapy is less widely known than other approaches to mental wellbeing. In this article I will attempt to briefly highlight its principles and outline why I believe it could and should play a more important role in how we address the problems we all inevitably face as part of life.

In essence, Existential Psychotherapy is the application of philosophical ideas to the problems of living. At its most effective, it can enable a person to better understand the potential of their existence and spur them on to finding a fresh perspective on life and how they live it. It can help people find wisdom and learning in their suffering and equip them to make considered, brave choices, which allow them to accept and transcend their current situation that brings them to therapy.

Camus' fundamental philosophical question of judging whether or not life is worth living captures a significant part of the philosophy of existentialism: meaning. It is predicated on the basis that, if we start from the point where we accept that life is worth living, then we have to commit to live it in the best way we can within our determined limits and have a responsibility to ourselves to create a meaningful existence in the face of the inevitable existential anxiety that comes with this challenge.

Existential psychotherapy is a phenomenological approach to therapy, which places the importance on the subjective experience of the individual in therapy and places greater importance on describing that experience as opposed to interpreting and judging.

An existential therapist's work is always philosophically grounded in the four givens of existence - problems that naturally arise from the fact that we exist: Freedom and the often forgotten responsibility that goes with it, Isolation, Death and Meaninglessness.

Each given is rooted in the philosophical works of the existential thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche; Heidegger to Sartre and form the foundation of existential therapeutic work. Below I will briefly explore the givens and touch upon what phenomenology means in practice with the hope of giving greater clarity to sometimes misunderstood approach to psychotherapy.

Freedom and Responsibility

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give life a meaning." Jean-Paul Sartre.

As self-conscious beings with the ability to reflect and make choices we are "condemned to freedom." Sartre uses the word condemned to convey that having such freedom is not, as with some popular notions of freedom, the ability to do whatever one wants; it comes with a price, and

that is responsibility. Faced with the heavy responsibility of making the most of one's freedom to choose we become anxious.

Not anxious in the sense that we have come to see it in society, a neurotic disorder, something to be treated with pills and avoided, but a natural state of angst that comes from having to make our own way in a tough and unforgiving world. In the words of Emmy Van Deurzen: "It is a dis-ease but not a disease,"

As long as we are alive and aware of our potential to act in different ways, anxiety will be present to alert us to the importance of everything we do. A philosophical approach to anxiety is to use it to inspire courage; to transcend our feelings of worry. The better we deal with such anxiety and the more we make courageous decisions in spite of it, the more we realise what we are capable of.

Even those with a deterministic view of the universe have to labour under the illusion of free will and still have to make choices on a daily basis. Instead of snubbing the idea of free will, Existential Psychotherapy embraces it as the starting point for any individual wishing to create more direction in their lives and make the best of their potential for change within their determined limits.

Through the therapeutic dialogue, it is possible to reconnect an individual with what they care about, highlight values they hold dear and enable them to reflect on the potential consequences of their choices. Being able to think through choices philosophically from a perspective of greater clarity of who they are and where they want to go in life is a skill which the therapist will seek to instill in any individual they work with, with the hope of empowering them to become more independent and resilient by taking ownership of their choices in the outside world.

Isolation

"In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." Albert Camus.

Isolation is more than just whether one is physically alone or not as it is quite possible to be in a crowded concert full of life, energy and music and feel completely desolate and psychologically isolated from those around you. On the other hand, it is completely possible to be alone and yet fully engaged in your own world where feelings of isolation are far from your mind.

From an existential perspective, the feeling of isolation comes from being disconnected with the world. The more we give into anxiety, the more we withdraw from being the person we would like to be which can give rise to feeling dispirited or depressed.

This feeling of existential isolation is linked to what Heidegger referred to as "authenticity." The more choices we make on the basis of what others think we should do, the further we drift from our more authentic selves - although the idea of an authentic self is a fluid concept, everchanging and we change through life - the more isolated we feel in our personal world to the extent where we may feel lonely in a crowded room or like we don't want to go out into the world at all.

If we learn to act in a more "authentic" way, we are able to make choices more in tune with who we are a what feels more homely; what feels right for you at that moment which diminishes our feeling of isolation and makes us feel more alive.

And so an existential practitioner will seek to enable a person to connect or reconnect themselves with the things that make them feel abuzz with life so that, whether alone, or in company, they are able to feel creatively engaged in the act of living, connected to a sense of self and a sense of purpose in what they are doing. The idea is that a person should live for themselves and then through that benefit others, as opposed to solely living for oneself or losing themselves in the world of others.

Death

"If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - only then will I be free to become myself." Martin Heidegger.

We have come to view death as something awful. It is a social taboo. Something to be swept under the carpet and forgotten about. We have become complacent in our relative security and grown to expect any ailments and illnesses to be treated immediately and with success.

Our technological know how has removed the spectre of death that was always a much more immediate part of past human cultures as the majority of us in society no longer struggle to meet our basic needs. Previously incurable diseases are now easily quashed and we have the capacity to keep people alive well beyond their independent ability to survive naturally.

However, we are mortal beings and what Heidegger is saying is that coming to terms with our mortality, having that idea thrumming along in the background of our consciousness as we move through life, acknowledging that our time here is finite, can give one a deep motivation to make the most of one's time; to value each day and not to waste it; to appreciate the experience of living and move courageously along your chosen path with integrity and gratitude.

An existential therapist's work will sometimes be to connect an individual with this sense of importance; that life is what we have and it can be lived and appreciated on many different levels. Often we may lose this perspective and become preoccupied with "the pettiness of life" when, if we take a step back, and think philosophically about our experience, we can reconnect with what is important.

Meaninglessness

"It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe." Albert Camus.

The logical conclusion of the rational, atheistic, scientific-minded human is that there is no proof that life has any meaning. In the late 19th century Nietzsche foresaw the potential danger of the decline in religious belief and the rise of nihilism:

"God is dead. And we have killed him...Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

In the absence of a divine explanation of the universe which automatically bestows meaning on the life of the individual, we are left to do "become Gods" by taking responsibility for creating that meaning ourselves.

What existential philosophy and psychotherapy seeks to do is to use that idea to empower the individual. When Camus refers to the Universe's "benign indifference," he is saying just that: the fact that it is indifferent enables us to be the creators of our own destinies; to use it as a canvas upon which we create meaning. Whether that be through engagement with religious ideas or not, it implies that a critical evaluation of one's own beliefs is needed in order to act in the world from a position of conviction and greater purpose.

In this pursuit of meaning, the job of the existential therapist is to highlight values and encourage reflection. Often, incongruency between values and reality or the way we act in the world and the way we would act ideally can be a source of existential frustration. The process of existential therapy will try to enable a person to realise this disparity and encourage action to allow the individual to connect their inner world of values and meaning with their actions in the outer world. It is through this act of integrating these levels of being and connecting with the world that brings meaning to the life of the individual.

Phenomenology

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." Søren Kierkegaard.

Existential Psychotherapy is a phenomenological approach to psychotherapy which means that the golden rule is to facilitate the individual to describe their subjective experience of the world to establish what the experience means to them, as opposed to imposing an interpretation on them.

The existential therapist must therefore keep an open mind in order to allow people to investigate their own being. And so the therapist must attempt to be "co-present" with the person as they wrestle with their own personal existential problems and solutions and not try to provide them from a preconceived notion of objective truth.

The therapist does not seek to label a person with a diagnosis that may disempower them in their struggle with whatever issue they face. Whilst it is of course important to have a wide knowledge of psychological conditions, the existential therapist must be aware of the consequences of any such label and whether it would be helpful for that person in the future. Take the example of anxiety: will a label of "anxiety disorder" encourage a person to confront and transcend their anxieties or will it lead to evasion and medication?

The important thing to bear in mind is what will enable the individual. There are a wide range of psychological interventions for a whole variety of ailments, but an existential practitioner must always look at what is happening through a philosophical lens and not jump to a pre-existing set of treatments or quick fixes.

This is not to say that an existential approach is always the answer and that referrals to other types of practitioner should never be made, there are so many approaches to mental health, all of which

have their value, but we must wary of pathologising and treating a person based on a set of symptoms rather than a more holistic approach to mental wellbeing.

Conclusion

"Happiness is the simple harmony between human beings and the life they lead." Albert Camus.

Philosophy can help everyone to develop moral and ethical principles for themselves and to find out what opens them up to the art of living in the world and bloom like a flower reaching skyward, attracting new life. Existentialism recognises the unique potential of the human being to exercise free will, within a determined framework, and create their own essence and continually change in a dialectical relationship between their outer and inner worlds in a bid to find that harmony to which Camus refers.

At its best, it can help us to be unafraid of the suffering that we will inevitably experience in life and enables us to understand that times of crisis are moments for reflection and learning. It helps uncover what is important to us through phenomenological enquiry and sparks an intense motivation in people who are always surprised by what they are capable of when engaged in something that matters.

It is based on an honest, open, kind, peaceful dialogue that searches for meaning and truth and can enable people to learn how to face their troubles and dilemmas in a way that gives them greater clarity, greater freedom from previous contradictions and confusion.

The ultimate goal is for people learn to love their fate and their lives, make the most of what they have, be the best of who they are and contribute to the world in their own way while they can. In short, to inspire courageous action and a deeper way of living.

Edited by: Maria Fernanda, Alejandra Alonso y David Aparicio

Published on [Psyciencia.com](https://psyciencia.com)

Image: [Pexeles.com](https://pexeles.com)