

## **Course Material (E-Content) of Psychology**

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### **Existential Approach to Clinical Psychology**

Existential psychology is an approach to psychology and psychotherapy that is based on several premises, including: understanding that a "whole" person is more than the sum of his or her parts; understanding people by examining their interpersonal relationships, understanding that people have many levels of self-awareness that can be neither ignored nor put into an abstract context, understanding that people have free will and are participants rather than observers in their own lives, and understanding that people's lives have purpose, values, and meaning.

The existential approach considers human nature to be open-ended, flexible and capable of an enormous range of experience. The person is in a constant process of becoming. I create myself as I exist. There is no essential, solid self, no given definition of one's personality and abilities.

Existential thinkers avoid restrictive models that categorise or label people. Instead, they look for the universals that can be observed transculturally. There is no existential personality theory which divides humanity up into types or reduces people to part components. Instead, there is a description of the different levels of experience and existence that people are inevitably confronted with.

Unlike other approaches to psychology and psychotherapy, the existential approach focuses on the role of meaning as a pathway to survive and thrive in a chaotic and meaningless world. This approach offers a way to explore the richness and depth of human existence and shows the possibilities of living fully and vitally through meaning making. An existential therapist does not see life as a problem to be solved but as a series of dilemmas and paradoxes to be accepted and lived with openness and authenticity.

Therapists who practice existential psychology treat their clients by submerging themselves in the client's world. For the therapist, therapy is a process in which they, too, are participating. This is a process that seeks meaning within the whole of the person's existence, including the client's personal history. The existential approach is first and foremost philosophical. It is concerned with the understanding of people's position in the world and with the clarification of what it means to be alive. It is also committed to exploring these questions with a receptive attitude, rather than a dogmatic one: the search for truth with an open mind and an attitude of wonder is the aim, not the fitting of the client into pre-established categories and interpretations.

**Ludwig Binswanger** was the first existentialist psychiatrist. The works of authors such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger greatly inspired him. This allowed him to approach every patient's reality in a unique way. Moreover, he put aside that limited perspective that stated that a therapist would only focus on the individual's pathological aspects. For the first time, therapies started focusing on the human being's reality, circumstances, and context.

Ludwig referred to the fact that human beings were open to any experience. Therefore, the patient's psyche isn't an isolated entity or reduced to its own processes. An individual's behaviour is, in a way, defined by their environment and their interpretation of it. He applied an anthropological approach in order to understand the patient's behaviour.

According to him, mental illness is, therefore, not an isolated entity. It doesn't always respond to an individual and reduced process of the patient's psyche. It's also important to take into account the structural links that the patient establishes.

To understand pathologies, it's vital for many aspects to be studied. For example, the way in which individuals experience their reality and understanding how it makes them feel both physically and emotionally. In addition to this, it's important to understand their social relationships.

**Rollo May** is also an existential psychologist. Even though people usually link him to humanistic psychology and even psychoanalysis, his main approach was existential psychology. This is a rather striking approach that combines psychology and philosophy.

According to Rollo May, "The purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free". He proposed the existential psychotherapy, which is a process by which people

explore the existence of those individuals who ask for help. It seeks to determine said individuals' concerns and analyzes them through dialogue. Its goal is to identify prejudice and detect the things that lead to negative consequences. This type of psychotherapy doesn't necessarily lead to well-being, but to a more rational way of facing life.

### **The existential therapy:**

Existential Therapy values the interactive, relational and embodied nature of human consciousness and human existence. It considers that human beings are free to effect change in their lives in a responsible, deliberate, ethical and thoughtful manner, by understanding their difficulties and by coming to terms with the possibilities and limitations of the human condition in general and of their own lives in particular. It emphasises the importance of finding meaning and purpose by engaging with life at many levels, physical, social, personal and spiritual. It does not prescribe a particular worldview but examines the tensions and contradictions in a person's way of being. This will include a consideration of existential limits such as death, failure, weakness, guilt, anxiety and despair.

### **Technique of existential therapy :**

There are many forms of Existential Therapy and each has its own specific methods and ways of exploring difficulties and change, but all forms of existential therapy work with dialogue to enable a person to find their own authority in exploring their life and the way they want to live it. This will often involve a philosophical and ethical exploration of the big questions of human existence, such as truth, meaning, justice, beauty, freedom, consciousness, choice, responsibility, friendship and love.

Existential Therapy is a pragmatic and experiential approach which favours embodiment, emotional depth, clarity and directness and which employs the principles of logic, paradox, dialectics, phenomenology and hermeneutic exploration amongst other methods.

### **Aim of existential therapy :**

Existential therapists aim to approach a person's un-ease or suffering in a phenomenological, holistic way. Symptoms are not seen as the defining aspect of a person's troubles, but rather as an expression of the person's disconnection from reality, or distorted reality.

Therefore Existential therapists see symptoms as a way of coping with difficulty, a problem, or an existential crisis. A person's experience will be

considered at all levels. Equal attention will be paid to a person's past, present and future. Existential therapists facilitate a person's greater awareness of their mode of being in the world, helping them to be more in touch with their concrete physicality, their interactions and relationships, their engagement with their own identity or lack of it, their concept of what grounds their being and the ways in which they may be able to bring the flow and their capacity for transcendence, learning and pleasurable forward movement back to life. It helps people to tolerate and embrace suffering and difficulty to engage with it constructively.

### **Criticism :**

1. Existential counseling has been criticized as being overly "intellectual." Some argue that those seeking therapy who cannot relate to deep self-reflection and self-examination may not be able to connect to the process of existential work. People seeking a more direct, time-limited approach may benefit more from cognitive-behavioural, rather than existential, forms of therapy.

2. Existential counsellor asks the individual to think about aspects of life that have to do with larger questions, such as why people exist and what the purpose of life is. This may be a conflict for some individuals, who believe that it's the role of religion to answer such large-scale questions.