



EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO GROUP THERAPY

By Mark Oliver

*“He who knows a ‘why’ for living, will
surmount almost every ‘how’.”*

(Nietzsche, as cited by Frankl, 1967)

Introduction

“That which does not kill me makes me stronger” (Nietzsche as quoted by Frankl, 1963)

- ▣ Existential therapy was derived from the existential philosophy movement of the late 1800s
- ▣ More of a philosophic approach to counseling
- ▣ Arose simultaneously in Western Europe and North America after World War II
- ▣ Classified as a Humanistic therapy
- ▣ Leading figures include Frankl, May and Yalom

Definitions of Existential therapy

▣ **Broad Definition**

- Existential therapy encourages clients to develop a full comprehension of their personal meanings of life and purpose of existence in a meaningless universe

▣ **Definition - Existential Analysis**

- “A phenomenological-personal psychotherapy with the aim of enabling a person to experience his or her life freely at the spiritual and emotional levels, to arrive at authentic decisions and to come to a responsible way of dealing with himself or herself and the world around them.” (Längle, p.5, 2005)

Four Ultimate Concerns (Yalom, 1980)

- ▣ **Death**
- ▣ **Freedom**
- ▣ **Isolation**
- ▣ **Meaninglessness**

Binswanger's Dimensions of World Views (Being in the world)

- ▣ **Umwelt** – the biological world, environment
- ▣ **Mitwelt** – literally means “with world” is the relationship with others in society and culture
- ▣ **Eigenwelt** – “own world” self-awareness and Self-relatedness. It is grasping of what something in the world personally means to the individual.
- ▣ **Überwelt** – (added later by Deurzen-Smith) A person's connection to abstract and absolute aspects of living - the ideological beliefs about life, death and existence

Realms of Encounters

- ▣ “**I - Focused**” realm – attempts to describe the experience of being “myself” in a relationship
- ▣ “**You - Focused**” – attempts to clarify my experience of “the other” being in relation with me
- ▣ “**We - Focused**” – attempts to describe and clarify each person’s experience of “us” being in relation with one another
- ▣ “**They - Focused**” – attempts to describe the person’s interrelational world with “the others” in his/her life. How a person’s “being in the world” is viewed from the perspective from the “others” point of view.

Three assumptions of Frankl's Logotherapy

- ▣ **Freedom of Will** – concept is based on the present human capacity to choose how one responds to external circumstances
- ▣ **Will to Meaning** – the essence of “meaning” is that people are responsible for fulfillment of their own specific “meanings” in their lives and this meaning can only be realized in relation to others
- ▣ **Meaning of life** – challenge in life is for each individual to find his or her unique meaning (purpose) in life

Logotherapy as existential analysis explores the meanings of: life, death, suffering, work, and love

Additional Concepts

- ▣ **The significance of time** – counselor is to be “present” in the here-and-now and be able to enter the phenomenological world of the client
- ▣ **Transcendence** – continual emergent evolution transcending one’s past and present in order to reach the future.
- ▣ **Authenticity** – autonomous self-creation of whom and what one is and what one is becoming
- ▣ **Existential vacuum** - Frankl’s term for the expression of boredom and apathy resulting from feelings of meaninglessness and boredom
- ▣ **Existential anxiety** – results when people recognize the paradoxes of existence

Characteristics of Appropriate clients

- ▣ Needs to be able to think abstractly
- ▣ Be able to be honest with themselves
- ▣ Be able to develop authenticity
- ▣ Appropriate for any client seeking the answers to existential questions
- ▣ Appropriate for adolescents
- ▣ Appropriate for substance use disorders
- ▣ Not appropriate for: children, clients who cannot think abstractly, or who are actively psychotic

Characteristics of existential counselors

- ▣ Be well versed in existential theory
- ▣ Be able to be present in the “here-and-now” and be able to enter the phenomenological world of the client
- ▣ Empathetic listening skills
- ▣ Remain nonjudgmental
- ▣ Prod clients in non-directive manner
- ▣ Confront existential issues in own life

Application to Group therapy

- ▣ Existential group therapy should have three main goals (Corey, 2009)
 - Facilitating members to become honest with themselves
 - Broadening members' perspectives on themselves and the world around them
 - Discerning what gives meaning to their present and future lives

Application to Group therapy

- ▣ Yalom states that existential group therapy can be a powerful tool in helping group members work on responsibility and positive interpersonal relationships (Yalom, 1995).
- ▣ Group therapy with its existentially normalizing factor of universality is a fitting modality to address existential concerns (Somov, 2007).
- ▣ Surveys asking group therapy clients to rank the reasons for seeking therapy found that clients consistently ranked existential issues in the top fifty percent (Yalom, 1995)

The Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ Group format application of Logotherapy developed by Somov (2007) to treat substance use disorders
- ▣ It is a professionally facilitated, content based, structured group that raises questions, facilitates a nonjudgmental discussion of various issues of existential significance, and involves various experiential exercises.

Eight Discussion Themes of The Meaning of Life Group

Meaning of:

- ▣ Meaninglessness
- ▣ Adversity
- ▣ Self
- ▣ Presence
- ▣ Death
- ▣ Freedom
- ▣ Substance Use
- ▣ Transition



Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 1 – Role induction and the meaning of meaninglessness.** In addition to establishing group rules and client responsibilities, there is discussion of the Five Themes of logotherapy to stimulate discussion. Additional points to discuss in the first group are: (1) search for meaning aids in search for motivation for recovery; (2) recovery is a treatment goal but not a life goal; it is a means to an end **NOT** an end in itself; and (3) substance use is normalized as a problematic search for meaning and/or dysfunctional coping with meaninglessness.

Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 2 – Meaning of Adversity:** What is the meaning of pain and suffering? Making sense out of suffering (adversity) taps into the immediate phenomenology of the clients and serves as an emotionally validating, meaning-finding, and motivation enhancing opportunity. Making sense out of random and adversity resulting from their failures can help them see that their suffering was not in vain. Discussion of problem focused verses emotion focused problem solving as an introduction to discussion of meaning focused suffering

Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 3 – Meaning of Self: Who/What am I?**
Leader presents rationale for know who one is and relates the topic of recovery as an means to an end rather than a goal in and of itself. This theme is the most relevant to most adolescents since they are in the midst of Erikson's stage of identity verse role confusion (Fitzgerald, 2005). The key point is to broaden the clients' views of themselves beyond being an "addict", or "recovering addict". Explore who/what they were and are in addition to being substance abusers

Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 4 – Meaning of Presence.** Goal is to awaken an appreciation for being alive right now and the urgency to at least pose if not ponder existential questions
- ▣ **Theme 5 – Meaning of Death: Where am I going?** Leader poses the question – If life is a journey where do you believe you are going? Themes to discuss – (1) Destination: Somewhere vs. Nowhere; (2) Substance use as transcendence; (3) Death as discontinuity of self; (4) Substance use as reversible death; and(5) Death and dying.

Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 6 – Meaning of Freedom: Am I free?** Starting at the abstract level and narrow it down to how one's beliefs about freedom and recovery are interrelated.
- ▣ **Theme 7 – Meaning of Substance Use: What does drinking/drugging do for us?** Review the interplay between substance use and various existential issues and using as a problematic coping strategy.

Meaning of Life Group

- ▣ **Theme 8 – Meaning of Transition** The search continues, dealing with ambiguity. Clients realize that the search for the answers to existential questions is a life long process. In closing the group the facilitator asks what group member learned and where do they go from here?

The Meaning of Life Group was originally designed for an inpatient adult population in a correctional facility but has since been modified for outpatient treatment groups including adolescents, pre-treatment groups, and relapse prevention (Corey, Corey, and Cory, 2010; Somov, 2007)

***Demonstration**

References

- Corey, G. (2009). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.
- Corey, M., Corey, G., & Corey, C. (2010). *Groups: Process and Practice* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.
- Fitzgerald, B. (2005). An existential view of adolescent development. *Journal of Adolescence*. 40(160), 793-799.
- Frankl, V. (1967). *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Längle, A. (2005). The search for meaning in life and the existential fundamental motivations. *Existential Analysis*. 16(1), 2-11. Retrieved on 4/11/2009 from PsycINFO data base.

References

- May, R., & Yalom, I. (1995). Existential psychotherapy. In J. C. Corsini & D. Wedding (Eds.), *Current Psychotherapies* (5th ed., pp. 262–292). Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock. Retrieved on 11/2/09 from http://www.thomsonedu.com/resource_uploads/downloads/0495097144_81300.doc
- Somov, P. (2007). Meaning of life group: Group application of logotherapy for substance use treatment. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 32(4), 316–345. Retrieved 10/26/09 from <http://search.ebscohost.com>, doi:10.1080/01933920701476664.
- Spinelli, E. (2002). The therapeutic relationship as viewed by existential psychotherapy: Re-evaluating the world. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*. 32(1), 111-118. Retrieved April 22, 2009 from DOI: 10.1023/A:1015547632139.
- Yalom, I. (1995). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (4th ed.). New York: Basic Books.