The Existential approach: An introduction.

Leijssen Mia. (Manuscript MOOC).

_Existing_ is a word that means "being in the world". The key question in the existential approach is: what does it really mean to be alive as a human being? The essence of "being human" seems to be that humans, unlike animals, wish to give meaning to their lives, something that we find expressed in the existential question: “what am I here for?” The German philosopher Heidegger talks of an "ontic" existence that is all about specific everyday experiences, and an "ontological" existence that refers to a deliberate and purposeful way of being in the world, corresponding with personal values and convictions.

We can look at "being in the world" from various dimensions of existence: your physical existence, your existence among people, your existence in relation to yourself and existence in relation to a system of meaning. You can develop different levels of knowledge and awareness in each of these dimensions. "Authenticity" refers to the "real contact" that you can experience in each of these dimensions of existence.

To start with, humans are anchored to the physical world by their body. How the world affects you and what you need from it is something that your body "experiences". In the words of Nietzsche: "There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy". Your body is more than a sophisticated machine; it is what you use to give meaning to the world. The most basic existential disorder occurs at the level of physical existence, where a person is cut off from bodily experiencing, has little or no contact with bodily sensations and treats the body as a thing that has to be brought under control. If you are in touch with your body you have a good "grounding", the basic precondition for authentic development in the other dimensions of existence.

Living with others typically involves tension between two important strivings in development: belonging/togetherness and having your own identity/autonomy. The relationship with the world you share with others can become disrupted at both poles: fusion with others or avoidance of interpersonal contact. Conflicts are inevitable when you live in the company of others. The existential approach requires that you take responsibility for yourself and empathize with the needs of others. More than that, a heartfelt encounter with others is intensely meaningful and healing.

Existing in relation with yourself gives you the personal freedom to do something with your life. Through being in contact with yourself you feel a call to take responsibility for developing your own authentic way of life. When you have been in contact with yourself for a long time you don't need other people's ready-made answers, you can form your own opinions. This assumes an awakening to who you really are and the choices available to you. Freedom means that you are able to make choices based on your own values and convictions, within natural and self-imposed boundaries. In this area existential approaches are in opposition to neurobiological approaches, which are skeptical of "personal choice". They expect to find answers by learning more about how the brain works. When faced with the world view of science the existential approach has to take on board the realisation that existence goes hand in hand with paradoxes: motives that appear to contradict themselves. Such as the tension between choice and predetermination. The merging of freedom with
responsibility. And the extremely paradoxical fact that the more you accept who you are and the things that determine who you are, the greater your chances of being able to change.

Viewing existence in relation to a **system of meaning** is a controversial theme in the existential movement. There is disagreement about whether humans themselves should create these meanings, as argued by nihilist existentialists such as Sartre, or whether there are given meanings that can be discovered and received, as suggested by religiously inspired existentialists such as Buber.

Yalom, for example, views belief in a transcendental reality as a defense mechanism against the limitations of human existence. As opposed to Frankl, for example, who believes that the situations you come face to face with offer an invitation to broaden your attribution of meaning to your life and thereby open yourself to creative turnarounds that far exceed what you think is humanly possible. Again, it is not certain whether these views are in complete opposition. For a very long time humankind was unaware of natural laws. Before gravity was understood it was impossible to explain why people remained attached to the earth if it was round. The existential fact that people are "drawn" to find meaning, whether created or discovered, or involving particular brain activity, is enough to reconcile the paradoxes. For individuals it is not about 'giving' or 'finding' meaning in the first place. It seems to be more about "BEING of meaning" to something or someone. This can be very immediate and tangible, and can even be in the form of caring for a plant or animaliv. Or very distant and intangible, such as feeling the presence of a God to whom you are of significancev.

The theory can be illustrated by some participantsvi on our existential well-being counseling course.

"I am an example of a person whose existential development was to some extent arrested. I always had a strong connection with my mother as a child. It was enough to make me feel good. When she committed suicide I was suddenly torn away from her. I had a very difficult introduction to social life, especially since my father wasn’t there to guide me and help me make my way through the world. So I withdrew into my own little world. I began to get the mental picture that I was all alone in the forest and I was in no state to look around me. The forest, the world, was a dark place, a place in which my father never shone his light. He was a very private man who was unable to respond with any sensitivity. I felt very confined and restricted, and this wasn’t helped by the fact that I literally and figuratively grew up in the church. I later repeated the family pattern in my first relationship, which hit the rocks. Luckily, I enjoyed language and reading, and in my life I was often inspired by great stories. I used to read novels and biographies, because they were examples of lives well lived and they encouraged me. Through self-reflection and a course on meditation I also learned to recognize my problems and now I have better ways of dealing with them. I was deeply inspired by the wonderful life story and example set by the Buddha. This helped me give space to the suffering in my life and that of others and strengthened me in my understanding of the meaning of my existence."

Testimony of a less understood life: "I was born with a serious physical disability that makes me very dependent on other people, even when it comes to intimate bodily functions, such as going to the toilet. My parents, to whom I am very grateful, often play a protective and even overprotective role by taking more decisions out of my hands than is necessary. It is harder for me to break away from my parents because the physical dependence is always there. Bonding with my peer group has its difficulties too. The preconceived ideas that
people have and the difficulties I experience just getting to social events can mean that friendships go on the back burner. One significant breakthrough was the arrival of my assistance dog. Actually, this was the first time in my life that I was given responsibility for someone (a dog) and suddenly I wasn't the last person in the care line. The dog recognizes me and needs a pack leader. That whole thing of needing each other has brought new meaning to my life.

Hildegarde gives an illustration of existential themes in the life of a 52-year-old mother of seven from Asia who survived a cluster munitions explosion. The woman was busy pulling bamboo shoots to supplement the family income when she stood on a cluster bomb that exploded. The doctors could not save her leg. The family were forced to sell their six buffalo and also had to pay towards the costs of medical care. As she had lost her mobility the woman was no longer able to look after her seven children. The family lost respect for her and the neighbors kept away. When she could no longer see the point of her life she considered killing herself, and actually tried a couple of times. But then she thought: "If I die, what will happen to my kids? Who will look after them? That's why I am still alive. My children. I can't do anything for them, but I have to be here for them." She also saw a lot of people in the same situation as her, but some of them were in an even worse condition: some had lost two legs, or their arms or eyes too. She compares herself to them and thinks she is more fortunate than them. That gives her some comfort, but immediately adds that she feels really sorry for them. She realizes that there are thousands of people like her in the world. Among all those victims she no longer feels alone. She believes that together they can improve the situation. Hildegarde describes how existential thinking has helped her, as a Western counsellor, to understand something of what is going in these people's lives. “Survivors in countries where life is a struggle for basic existence are more likely to experience their lives as the result of an accident like this as a stark 'being-in-the-world'- this world- as it unfortunately is. They often experience their corporeality through the disfigurement of their own body. Space and time converge at the place and time of the accident: from then on, there is always a before and an after the accident, and it is always there, as it were, in the present. From that moment on their life is no longer automatic, but the choice of whether or not to continue living becomes a reality, and in their mind it is a question of life or death." Hildegarde reflects on how corporeality has become the center of this woman's experience since the accident. Injury, disfigurement and death are central to other survival stories too. It is interesting from a psychological point of view that this woman compares herself with victims who have come off worse than she did, and that this gives her some comfort, yet there is also solidarity between the victims. Other crucial physical and social needs are mentioned: i.e. feeding the family. This is the life struggle in its barest form. She is sad at the thought of no longer being able to feed and clothe her children, but this also gives her the fighting spirit to want to be there for them. With her body's injury and disfigurement the question of whether or not life is worth living hits her with full force. Her children are the reason for her painful sense of powerlessness, yet at the same time the reason to carry on living. She wants to / must BE THERE for her children. This is not the same as providing for them materially. With this, she leaps from the physical and social dimension to the spiritual dimension. She discovers a reason for living despite the fact that she does not meet the physical requirements. This endorses Viktor Frankl's assertion that a person's most
important objective is not to pursue pleasure or to avoid pain, but to discover their reason for living. Her love for her children purely and simply takes her above the material concerns.

Existing is always a process that occurs in time and space. It was Nietzsche who once said that you should read a philosopher’s autobiography if you want to understand his work. Someone’s life story tells you something specific about how that person’s vision grew out of a particular life context. We can illustrate this to some extent with a few anecdotes from the history of Yalom and Frankl, two important figureheads of the existential movement.

Yalom\textsuperscript{vii} (1935-) describes human existence on the basis of four central concerns: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. According to Yalom, many problems arise out of denial of the finitude of life. Becoming aware of the reality of death, on the other hand, motivates you to make the best of your life at every moment and not to put things off until later. What stands out when you read the story of Yalom’s life are his frequent references to his unpleasant experiences of death\textsuperscript{viii}. When he was 6 years old he saw his pet cat get run over and killed by a car and felt entirely powerless to do anything about it. At the age of 9 he witnessed his father’s hysterics on hearing of the death of an uncle; the young Yalom ran out of the house to escape the unbearable atmosphere. When he was 14 his father (46) had a heart attack in the middle of the night and almost died. A doctor came to help and brought calm to the household. This experience later made Yalom decide to study medicine so he could save lives. The orthodox Jewish religious environment in which he grew up played a large part in shaping his view of life. He had to go to the synagogue with his father, where prayer gave him the feeling of being surrounded by delusional thinking. In a talk with an orthodox Rabbi he explained: “I would rather hang myself than spend my days following 613 daily commandments and praying to a god who is clearly fanatical about being praised”\textsuperscript{ix}. When expressing his religious scepticism Yalom also refers to the crude pedagogical approach of the Religious Education teachers he came across in his childhood. But he takes real inspiration from the likes of existential therapist Rollo May, to whom he refers as his mentor. Regarding this he says: “Our need for mentors shows our vulnerability and our desire for a superior power”\textsuperscript{x}. Yalom thinks of his best moments as being those experienced in talks with clients. It is no coincidence that he makes therapy his life’s work. One of his statements: “Explanations of the universe are irrelevant in my eyes: all I am interested in is the world of human relations and discussing the things that have been important in your life”\textsuperscript{xi}.

Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl\textsuperscript{xii} (1905-1997) is strongly influenced by his survival of the concentration camps. He witnessed the most horrific suffering during the three years of his imprisonment there. The inhumane conditions of the camps qualify him to make the remarkable statement that: it is when the basic needs of food, shelter and security are NOT met that the need for meaning is most crucial. Despite his own personal experience of so much suffering and harm, he says that mankind has the power to rise above suffering and that the power of evil does not win. According to Frankl, suffering and death have a purpose. In even the most extreme living conditions "the last human freedom" still remains: your choice of attitude to the situation. Through this you continue to grow, despite the misfortunes and humiliations. Frankl describes how the unbearable aspects of the concentration camps became bearable, by, for example: holding on to memories of loved ones, doing a good deed, such as giving someone your last piece of bread, feeling healed by the beauty of a sunset or a flower in bloom, having a sense of humor, feeling secure in God’s hands, trying to understand the motives of your tormentors, etc. Frankl based his therapeutic approach on this basic "desire for meaning" and gave it the name "Logotherapy", which literally translates as
"meaning therapy". He believes that discovering the meaning and purpose of life is much more important than trying to find happiness or self-fulfillment. On this point he quotes Nietzsche several times: “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how”. When people have no meaningful goals they end up in an "existential vacuum" that generates frustration, emptiness, depression, meaninglessness, dependence and other symptoms revealing "existential neurosis". Finding meaning often goes hand in hand with taking responsibility for the things that crop up along the path of life. Frankl is of the opinion that mental health "is, to a certain extent, based on the tension between what a person has already achieved and what they are yet to achieve, or the gap between what they are and what they are yet to become. This tension is inherent in humankind and therefore crucial to mental well-being. Without hesitation we should therefore challenge people to fulfil a potential meaning of life". Frankl’s Logotherapy works on the basis that even in the most difficult situations you should be receptive to your own truth, you can decide your own attitude and you can use your creativity to find meaning.

This short overview of the existential approach and the examples that go with it may, we hope, motivate and inspire you to recognize the existence of human suffering and not ignore the limitations of existence along your path to existential well-being. The optimism that shines through this approach should dispel any notion that this might be a pessimistic view of life. The existential approach delves deeply into perceptions of life meaning and generates valuable research and also demonstrates that existentialism is not just about brilliant philosophical thinking, but about the rich sources of human existence that are available to us. In subsequent sections of this course we will explore in depth different themes that are addressed by the existential approach.

Comparisons are made between the existential approach and person-centered/experiential counseling and psychotherapy. All these approaches take the client’s truth as a starting point, share a receptive attitude, acknowledge whatever comes up, and return to and stay with what is. The personal presence and involvement of the counsellor are also given much importance. The counsellor is real, transparent and direct in the interaction with others. However, existential counseling also places emphasis on existential themes. The goal of an existential approach is to help clients to develop a more authentic way of living. This means that clients are encouraged to become more aware of their actual existence, exploring and questioning their options, living more in accordance with their own values and convictions and shaping their environment in a manner that is a better fit with the authentic self. And a great deal of attention is paid to relationships, with the limitations and conflicts that are an inextricable part of the human condition. Clients are encouraged to acknowledge both their freedom and responsibility and to behave accordingly. Since people are seen as being inextricably linked to their surroundings, clients are encouraged not only to explore their own needs, feelings and longings, but also those of others.

Before you can integrate the existential approach in your counseling practice, it is important to observe and listen to yourself and other people, paying attention to existential themes.

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i “Existential philosophy can be seen as a diverse and heterogeneous series of ideas containing many areas of conflict and discord. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Nietzsche (1844-1900) are generally considered to be the fathers of existential philosophy. The movement reached its peak in the twentieth century with philosophers such as Buber (1878-1956), Jaspers (1883-1969), Tillich (1886-1965), Marcel (1889-1973), Merleau-Ponty..."
Camus (1913-1960), Heidegger (1889-1976) and Sartre (1905-1980). Existentialists are opposed to theories that see people as causally determined mechanisms, as if they were cogs in a bigger wheel or sophisticated animals. Existential philosophy should be understood as a response to any system of thought that tends to "dehumanise" the idea of humankind.


Emmy Van Deurzen based 4 dimensions of "being in the world": the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimensions on "Daseinsanalyse" by Binswanger and May.

Studies among the residents of residential care centres (homes for the elderly) show that the mortality rate can be halved just by giving the residents a plant to look after. Quoted from page 195 in Dr. David Servan-Schreiber (2005). Uw brein als medicijn. [Your brain as medication]. Kosmos. Utrecht/ Antwerp.

For example, the words “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased”, quoted in the Bible in Matthew 3,17; Mark 1,11; Luke 3,22; John 1,34 as the words spoken by God at the birth of Jesus, are considered by many Christians to apply to every person.

Henri Nouwen and others describe this experience as a personal reason for living.

With thanks to these people, who wish to remain anonymous.

Hildegarde Vansintjan is an Advocacy Officer at Handicap International, an international non-governmental organisation, and a researcher for the Handicap International and the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor. She works with victims of cluster munitions through the project “Ban Advocates”, which was launched by Handicap International in 2007. The account given here is based on excerpts from her final project for the existential well-being counseling course. KU Leuven, edition 2011-2012.


Yalom, I. D. (2008). Tegen de zon in kijken: doodsangst en hoe die te overwinnen. (M. van Horn, Trans.). Amsterdam: Balans. [Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death]

Yalom gives an insight into the origin of his own fear of death.


