

Existential Therapy: A Dynamic Psychotherapy

Existential Psychotherapy

by

Irvin D. Yalom

Existential psychotherapy is a form of dynamic psychotherapy. “Dynamic” is a term frequently used in the mental health field—as in “psychodynamics”; and if one is to understand one of the basic features of the existential approach, it is necessary to be clear about the meaning of dynamic therapy. “Dynamic” has both lay and technical meanings. In the lay sense “dynamic” (deriving from the Greek *dunasthi*, “to have strength or power”) evokes energy and movement (a “dynamic” football player or politician, “dynamo,” “dynamite”); but this is not its technical sense for, if it were, what therapist would own to being non-dynamic—that is, slow, sluggish, stagnant, inert? No, the term has a specific technical use that involves the concept of “force.” Freud’s major contribution to the understanding of the human being is his dynamic model of mental functioning—a model that posits that there are forces in conflict within the individual, and that thought, emotion, and behavior, both adaptive and psychopathological, are the resultant of these conflicting forces. Furthermore—and this is important—*these forces exist at varying levels of awareness; some, indeed, are entirely unconscious.*

The psychodynamics of an individual thus include the various unconscious and conscious forces, motives, and fears that operate within him or her. The dynamic psychotherapies are therapies based upon this dynamic model of mental functioning.

So far, so good. Existential therapy, as I shall describe it, fits comfortably in the category of the dynamic therapies. But what if we ask, Which forces (and fears and motives) are in conflict? What is the *content* of this internal conscious and unconscious struggle? It is at this juncture that dynamic existential therapy parts company from the other dynamic therapies. Existential therapy is based on a radically different view of the specific forces, motives, and fears that interact in the individual.

The precise nature of the deepest internal conflicts is never easy to identify. The clinician working with a troubled patient is rarely able to examine primal conflicts in pristine form. Instead, the patient harbors an enormously complex set of concerns: the primary concerns are deeply buried, encrusted with layer upon layer of repression, denial, displacement, and symbolization. The clinical investigator must contend with a clinical picture of many threads so matted together that disentanglement is difficult. To identify the primary conflicts, one must use many avenues of access—deep reflection, dreams, nightmares, flashes

of profound experience and insight, psychotic utterances, and the study of children. I shall, in time, explore these avenues, but for now a stylized schematic presentation may be helpful. A brief review of three contrasting views of the individual's prototypic intrapsychic conflict—Freudian, neo-Freudian, and existential—illustrates by counterpoint the existential view of psychodynamics.

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EXISTENTIAL PSYCHODYNAMICS

The existential position emphasizes a different kind of basic conflict: neither a conflict with suppressed instinctual strivings nor one with internalized significant adults, but *instead a conflict that flows from the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence*. And I mean by "givens" of existence certain ultimate concerns, certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part, of the human being's existence in the world.

How does one discover the nature of these givens? In one sense the task is not difficult. The method is deep personal reflection. The conditions are simple: solitude, silence, time, and freedom from the everyday distractions with which each of us fills his or her experiential world. If we can brush away or "bracket" the everyday world, if we reflect deeply upon our "situation" in the world, upon our existence, our boundaries, our possibilities, if we arrive at the ground that underlies all other ground, we invariably confront the givens of existence, the "deep structures," which I shall henceforth refer to as "ultimate concerns." This process of reflection is often catalyzed by certain urgent experiences. These "boundary" or "border" situations, as they are often referred to, include such experiences as a confrontation with one's own death, some major irreversible decision, or the collapse of some fundamental meaning-providing schema.

This book deals with four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. The individual's confrontation with each of these facts of life constitutes the content of the existential dynamic conflict.

Death. The most obvious, the most easily apprehended ultimate concern is death. We exist now, but one day we shall cease to be. Death will come, and there is no escape from it. It is a terrible truth, and we respond to it with mortal terror. "Everything," in Spinoza's words, "endeavors to persist in its own being";³ and a core existential conflict is the tension between the awareness of the inevitability of death and the wish to continue to be.

Freedom. Another ultimate concern, a far less accessible one, is freedom. Ordinarily we think of freedom as an unequivocally positive concept. Throughout recorded history has not the human being yearned and striven for freedom? Yet freedom viewed from the perspective of ultimate ground is riveted to dread. In its existential sense "freedom" refers to the absence of external structure. Contrary to ev-

eryday experience, the human being does not enter (and leave) a well-structured universe that has an inherent design. Rather, the individual is entirely responsible for—that is, is the author of—his or her own world, life design, choices, and actions. “Freedom” in this sense, has a terrifying implication: it means that beneath us there is no ground—nothing, a void, an abyss. A key existential dynamic, then, is the clash between our confrontation with groundlessness and our wish for ground and structure.

Existential Isolation. A third ultimate concern is isolation—not *interpersonal* isolation with its attendant loneliness, or *intrapersonal* isolation (isolation from parts of oneself), but a fundamental isolation—an isolation both from creatures and from world—which cuts beneath other isolation. No matter how close each of us becomes to another, there remains a final, unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone. The existential conflict is thus the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish for contact, for protection, our wish to be part of a larger whole.

Meaninglessness. A fourth ultimate concern or given of existence is meaninglessness. If we must die, if we constitute our own world, if each is ultimately alone in an indifferent universe, then what meaning does life have? Why do we live? How shall we live? If there is no preordained design for us, then each of us must construct our own meanings in life. Yet can a meaning of one’s own creation be sturdy enough to bear one’s life? This existential dynamic conflict stems from the dilemma of a meaning-seeking creature who is thrown into a universe that has no meaning.

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHODYNAMICS: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

“Existential psychodynamics” refers, thus, to these four givens, these ultimate concerns, and to the conscious and unconscious fears and motives spawned by each. The dynamic existential approach retains the basic dynamic *structure* outlined by Freud but radically alters the *content*. The old formula of:

DRIVE → ANXIETY → DEFENSE MECHANISM*

is replaced by

*Where the *anxiety* is a signal of danger—that is, if instinctual drives are permitted free rein, the organism is endangered, since the ego will be overwhelmed and retaliatory punishment (castration-abandonment) is inevitable; and the *defense mechanisms* restrict direct drive gratification but afford indirect expression—that is, in displaced, sublimated, or symbolic form.

AWARENESS OF
ULTIMATE CONCERN → ANXIETY → DEFENSE MECHANISM*

Both formulas assume that anxiety is the fuel of psychopathology; that psychic operations, some conscious and some unconscious, evolve to deal with anxiety; that these psychic operations (defense mechanisms) constitute psychopathology; and that, though they provide safety, they invariably restrict growth and experience. A major difference between these two dynamic approaches is that Freud’s sequence begins with “drive,” whereas an existential framework begins with awareness and fear. As Otto Rank knew,⁶ the therapist has far more leverage if he or she views the individual primarily as a fearful, suffering being rather than as an instinctually driven one.

These four ultimate concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness—constitute the corpus of existential psychodynamics. They play an extraordinarily important role at every level of individual psychic organization and have enormous relevance to clinical work. They also provide a central organizing principle; the four sections of this book will focus on each ultimate concern in turn and explore the philosophical, psychopathological, and therapeutic implications of each.