

Existential Theory and Therapy

THIS CHAPTER

Reviews the key figures and contextual historical factors associated with the development and evolution of existential theory and therapy

Outlines and describes core theoretical principles of existential counseling and psychotherapy

Describes and discusses principles and techniques associated with existential therapy practice including,

- Formation of an I-Thou therapeutic relationship

- Existential therapy strategies and techniques

- Existential integration

Offers two unique existential therapy vignettes that demonstrate existential strategies in action

Illustrates how treatment planning, outcomes assessment, and gender and cultural issues can be integrated into an existential therapy approach

Reviews the empirical status of existential therapy approaches

Offers resources for further study

Get ready to get philosophical. This chapter is about life's big issues and concerns. Together, we explore meaning, death, responsibility, and more. Although some therapy approaches are more in line with the great American quick fix, existentialists are interested in and unimpressed by gimmicks and techniques (Schneider, Galvin, & Serlin, 2009). For existentialists, a narrowly defined psychotherapy administered as a technical procedure to be prescribed and applied to clients is viewed as an unhealthy manifestation of a deteriorating society. To capture the creative, non-linear, and meaning-focused nature of existential therapy, we begin with a quotation from Viktor Frankl (1969):

Actually, I have been told in Australia, a boomerang only comes back to the hunter when it has missed its target, the prey. Well, man also only

returns to himself, to being concerned with his self, after he has missed his mission, has failed to find meaning in life. (p. 9)

Some forms of counseling and psychotherapy, such as Freud's psychoanalysis, evolved primarily from medical practice with disturbed patients. Others, such as behavior therapy, arose from experimental psychological research. Still others, such as person-centered therapy (Chapter 5) and individual psychology (Chapter 3), have roots in clinical practice, humanistic-existential philosophy, and, to some degree, psychotherapy research. In contrast, existential approaches to counseling and psychotherapy are directly and deeply linked to **existential philosophy**. This philosophical perspective focuses primarily on the inevitable conditions humans face during life, such as death,

responsibility, freedom, and purpose. Existentialists typically eschew scientific research because of its inauthentic artificiality. Additionally, although they practice therapy with individuals, couples, families, and groups, their approach is systematically guided by philosophical perspectives, rather than knowledge obtained from therapeutic practice. As Irvin Yalom, a renowned existential therapist, has stated, "I have always felt that the term 'existential therapy' reflects not a discrete, comprehensive body of techniques, but, instead, a posture, a sensibility in the therapist" (Serlin, 1999, p. 143).

KEY FIGURES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The roots of existential philosophical thought are diverse. There's no single philosopher from whom all existential thinking flows. Most texts point to nineteenth-century philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche as major players in the formulation of existentialism, and, in fact, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche do capture and embody certain dimensions of the diversity of thinking inherent in existentialism.

Soren Kierkegaard

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) lived nearly his entire life in Copenhagen. Kierkegaard was devoutly religious. He was powerfully shaken when he discovered, at age 22, that his father had not only cursed God, but also seduced his mother prior to marriage. Subsequently, Kierkegaard's writings focused primarily on religious faith and the meaning of Christianity. Eventually he concluded that religious faith was irrational and attainable only via a subjective experiential "leap of faith." For Kierkegaard, virtuous traits such as responsibility, honesty, and commitment are subjective choices—often in response to a subjective religious conversion. Kierkegaard did not describe himself as an existentialist, but his work is seen as precursor to the existential philosophical movement, which formally began some 70 years following his death.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In contrast to Kierkegaard who began from a position of firm religious faith, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) had strongly negative feelings toward Christianity. It was he who, in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, stated "God is dead." Although he may have been referring to a societal emptiness, he also claimed that religion used fear and resentment to pressure individuals into moral behavior. Instead of following a religion, he believed, individuals should channel their passions into creative, joyful activities. Irvin Yalom offers a fascinating view of Nietzsche's psychological suffering in a historical fiction piece titled *When Nietzsche Wept*. In this novel, Yalom (1992) weaves existential principles into a fictional therapeutic encounter between Breuer, Freud, and Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche represent an interesting paradox or **dialectic** in existential thinking. A dialectic involves a process where learning is stimulated from the integration of opposites. On the one hand, some existentialists profess extreme and devout religious faith, whereas others are staunchly atheistic. Still others claim a more agnostic middle ground. These differences in fundamental human beliefs are representative of the wide sweep of human intellectual diversity and provide fodder for some serious and fascinating philosophical explorations.

A Little Etymology

The etymological origin of **philosophy** is from the Greek "Philos" (meaning loving) and "Sophos" (meaning wisdom) and so the literal translation is "loving wisdom." In contrast, psychology comes from the Greek *psukh*, which started out meaning *breath* and eventually developed semantically into "soul, spirit" and "mind." Modern psychology is typically defined as the science of the mind or mental states and processes, although modern behavioral scientists would likely insist on the introductory textbook definition of "the science of behavior."

We provide this detour into etymology to activate your intellectual enthusiasm. Try thinking

of existential psychology as a crossroads between loving wisdom and the science of behavior. Put another way, as you read this chapter let the data feed your soul.

Learning From Dialectics

It may be that polarized positions (or dialectics) regarding religion and other issues within existential philosophy and psychology are predestined. After all, as Fritz Perls emphasized in his existentially based Gestalt approach to treatment, humans seem hard-wired to take on polarizing positions. He stated: “every psychological phenomenon . . . [is] experienced as a polarity” (F. Perls, 1969a, p. 3).

Hegel believed human reasoning and ideas evolve through a **dialectical process**. Essentially, what happens is (a) a concept or idea is developed, which then, (b) fuels the generation of the opposite idea, which produces conflict between the ideas. It is through this conflict of polarized ideas that a new, synthesized, and higher level of truth can be developed.

Hegel’s dialectic is relevant to counseling and psychotherapy. In fact, one of the most popular new approaches to therapy, dialectical behavior therapy (M. Linehan, 1993), involves, in part, a direct application of Hegel’s dialectic. Specifically, DBT practitioners adopt the following dialectical position of radical acceptance when working with clients: “I accept you as you are and I am helping you to change” (J. Sommers-Flanagan & R. Sommers-Flanagan, 2007a).

The ongoing struggle between polarized factions within the individual can be seen as a primary pathway toward deeper understanding of the true nature of the self. This seems an appropriate outcome of the existential struggle because, for most existential practitioners, regardless of religious orientation, the overarching goal of therapy is to help the client discover and explore the authentic self.

Then again, as we consider the big questions, even the existence of the self is in doubt. For example, some multicultural and post-modern worldviews not only question the utility of thinking about an authentic self—they question its existence.

Hoffman and colleagues (Hoffman, Stewart, Warren, & Meek, 2009) describe this “crisis of the self”:

The influence of Eastern thought, particularly Buddhist philosophy, introduced recognition of no-self as an ideal (Mosig, 2006). Cultural analyses provided examples of cultures which did not have a traditional conception of self, but rather understood what is referred to as the self in Western thought in terms of roles which are much more fluid over time. . . . In the end, the necessity of a self conception, so basic to Western psychology, is now in question. (p. 136)

And so if we keep in mind the following:

- Humans naturally create polarities.
- These polarities generate conflict.
- Through this conflict there is a potential (it’s not automatic) for synthesis and intellectual development.
- Some traditional theorists emphasize the centrality of the self, while postmodern and culturally diverse perspectives deemphasize the self.
- We learn from both perspectives—self as central and no-self as ideal—and develop a more wise and balanced view of self.
- This process links directly—albeit with complexity—to existential practice.

Of course, philosophy doesn’t stop with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Hegel; philosophy never stops. In particular, Pascal, Husserl, Vaihinger, Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel were instrumental in popularizing and developing existential perspectives.

One final historical footnote before moving forward: Some writers speculate that the *Zeitgeist* or context of the 1940s was ripe for existentialism, especially European existentialism. This is because the devastation of World War I, followed by further global conflict in World War II, including ethnic cleansing of Jewish people in and around Germany, stimulated an introspective process focusing on death, personal responsibility, freedom, love, and other related existential topics.

Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Prototype

Existentialism is perhaps most aptly and succinctly articulated by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who claimed, with bold certainty, “Freedom is existence, and in its existence precedes essence” and *man’s essence is his existence* (Sartre, 1953, p. 5).

If you’re not sure what Sartre’s assertions mean, you’re likely not alone. Existential philosophy is sometimes so utterly abstract that it’s difficult to distill practical implications from philosophical statements. Grasping meaning from existential philosophy is especially challenging for practicing therapists and students of counseling and psychotherapy who are usually looking for concrete advice about exactly how to behave during a therapy session. We have only this minor reassurance for you as you embark on this chapter: In many ways, the entire purpose of existential philosophy is to struggle with individual, personal meaning. Therefore, as you grope and flail for meaning within the philosophy that embodies this chapter, you will also be experiencing existential psychology.

Rollo May (1962) explains Sartre’s statement *Freedom is existence, and in its existence precedes essence*: “That is to say, there would be no *essences*—no truth, no structure in reality, no logical forms, no *logos*, no God nor any morality—except as man in affirming his freedom makes these truths” (pp. 5–6).

Sartre’s philosophical proposition is that there are no absolute or essential truths (essences), but that we as individual human beings create our own truth and reality. His statement articulates the pure existential position. Once again, you may recognize that Adler’s (Chapter 3) and Vaihinger’s (1911) concepts of lifestyle and technique of acting as if, as well as his earlier ideas about fictional finalism are consistent with this proposition; each individual constructs his or her reality.

Paul Tillich discusses Sartre’s second statement, “Man’s essence is his existence.”

There are, however, only rare moments . . . in which an almost pure existentialism has been reached. An example is Sartre’s doctrine of man. I refer to a sentence in which the whole

problem of essentialism and existentialism comes into the open, his famous statement that man’s essence is his existence. The meaning of this sentence is that man is a being of whom no essence can be affirmed, for such an essence would introduce a permanent element, contradictory to man’s power of transforming himself indefinitely. *According to Sartre, that is what he acts to be.* (Tillich, 1961, p. 9)

This description speaks to a key proposition of pure existential theory. That is, humans contain no permanent elements. This concept is further articulated in a popular phrase in the contemporary media, “to reinvent oneself.” If you “reinvent yourself” (or even talk or think about anyone reinventing himself or herself), you’re using the existentially based concepts of impermanence and emergence. For existentialists, transformation is within reach.

Following these lines of thought, existentialism strongly emphasizes personal choice, personal consciousness, and personal responsibility. If humans construct their own reality and are continuously capable of self-reinvention, then all behavior is owned by the individual. Sartre lays claim to the reality of human responsibility succinctly when he states: “I am my choices” (Sartre, 1953, p. 5).

Existentialism is, at its core, antideterministic. If you suggest to existentialists that human behavior is determined by particular factors, events, or mental processes, they’re likely to roll their eyes. This is because existentialists reject the proposition that humans are enslaved by Freudian unconscious, instinctual drives, and they reject environmental stimulus-response determinants as well. In place of instinctual and environmental causes of behavior, existentialists posit individual choice and human freedom. The past does not and cannot determine the future. Our particular choices in this moment determine the now, and our choices in the next moment determine that moment.

But what, from a purely existential perspective, determines our daily, moment-to-moment choices? For Sartre, the answer is this: Human reality “identifies and defines itself by the ends which it pursues” (Sartre, 1953, p. 19). Of course, this

theme should sound familiar because, once again, it resonates with Adler's ideas about purposeful, goal-oriented behavior and the style of life. The following quotation from Yalom's discussion of Frankl's existential perspective further clarifies this common theme:

The difference is between drive and strive. In our most essential being, in those characteristics that make us human rather than animal, we are not driven but instead actively strive for some goal. . . . "Striving" conveys a future orientation: we are pulled by what is to be, rather than pushed by relentless forces of past and present. (Yalom, 1980, p. 445)

Although existentialists believe in the unconscious, their particular unconscious is not in the Freudian tradition. As Yalom talks about being pulled by *what is to be*, we cannot help but move forward toward an understanding of how existential philosophy was transformed into existential therapy.

Viktor Frankl and the Statue of Responsibility



Viktor Frankl

Viktor Frankl was the leading existentialist in Europe during his time. He was born to a Jewish family in Vienna and studied medicine at the University of Vienna before marrying Tilly Grosser in 1941. He, Tilly, and his parents were deported to a concentration camp less than a year later. Initially, Frankl worked as a physician and then as a psychiatrist in the concentration camp, with a focus on suicide prevention, sometimes delivering lectures to imaginary audiences. On October 15, 1944, his plight became even more bleak as he was transported to Auschwitz and then to a Nazi concentration camp affiliated with Dachau. While

in these camps his father died and his wife and mother were murdered. In April 1945 Frankl was liberated from Dachau. He later married Eleonore Katharina Schwindt, a practicing Catholic and they continued honoring each other's religious beliefs by attending both the Catholic church and the Jewish synagogue while celebrating both Hanukkah and Christmas (Redsand, 2007).

Frankl is author of the most widely read existential work of all time, *Man's Search for Meaning* (V. Frankl, 1963). This book, originally published as *trotzdem Ja zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager* (*Saying Yes to Life in Spite of Everything: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*; 1946) and later as *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* (V. E. Frankl, 1959), describes Frankl's concentration camp experiences and outlines his particular therapeutic approach, **logotherapy**.

Frankl's logotherapy is centered around helping clients find meaning. He frequently quoted Nietzsche, stating: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how" (Frankl, 1963, p. 121). This perspective is distinctly different than Freud and Adler. Frankl (1963) wrote:

The striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a will to meaning in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the will to pleasure) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the will to power stressed by Adlerian psychology. (1963, p. 121)

Although he was a strong proponent of freedom, Frankl believed freedom could and would degenerate without an equal valuing of personal responsibility. He recommended that a statue of responsibility be erected on the West Coast of the United States to balance the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast (Frankl, 1963). In fact, a prototype for the statue of responsibility has been developed and the non-profit Statue of Responsibility Foundation is soliciting funds for the project.

Rollo May: From Existential Theory to Existential Practice



Rollo May

Most historians credit Rollo May with formally introducing and integrating existential thought into American counseling and psychotherapy (R. May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958). After obtaining his bachelor's degree in English from Oberlin College in Ohio, May was a missionary teacher

in Greece for 3 years in the early 1930s. During that time he traveled to Vienna in the summer, where he happened to take some seminars from Alfred Adler. In a 1987 interview, May described his experiences of taking a psychology course in college and then learning from Adler:

Well, in college, I took one course in psychology and I think I didn't learn much about human beings . . . I did learn a lot about pigeons and dogs. So I dropped the whole thing and majored in English literature.

So the next summer, I went up to Alfred Adler's seminar in Vienna and there I learned what psychotherapy can really be. It changed me very deeply. It opened up a great deal of new possibilities in my life. (p. 425)

Following his time in Greece and Europe, May returned to the United States, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in divinity, working with and befriending the existential theologian Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

May gave up the life of a pastor at a New Jersey church to study clinical psychology at Columbia University. Shortly thereafter he fell ill with tuberculosis and was on the brink of death, which forced him into 18 months of treatment in a sanitarium. Eventually May returned to Columbia, where he was granted a doctoral degree in clinical psychology in 1949 (DeCarvalho, 1996). His dissertation, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1977), argued that anxiety

was an essential component of the human condition. Some of May's major works include *Man's Search for Himself* (1953), *Love and Will* (1969), *The Courage to Create* (1975), and *Freedom and Destiny* (1981). His edited volume, *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958) was most instrumental in bringing existential thinking into the mainstream in the United States.

Although May was integral to bringing existential philosophy into psychological practice in the United States, he had predecessors in Europe. For example, nearly a decade before he began studying with Adler in the early 1930s, another early existential practitioner, young Viktor Frankl, had joined Adler's inner circle (in 1926). Gould writes,

Frankl agreed with Adler's viewpoint. Adler saw a person's freedom of choice as central . . . and . . . freedom of choice became the starting point for the development of Frankl's own theories. (Gould, 1993, p. 4)

Overall, the presence of existential thought within modern therapeutic practice can be traced 'back at' least to 'Alfred' Adler, who 'na' significant influence on both May and Frankl, both of whom initially popularized existential psychotherapy. Other, more recent major figures in existential psychotherapy and some of their key publications include:

- James Bugental (1915–2008): *The Search for Authenticity* (1965); *The Art of Psychotherapy* (1987); *Psychotherapy Isn't What You Think: Bringing the Psychotherapeutic Engagement into the Living Moment* (1999).
- Irvin Yalom (1931–): *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980); *Love's Executioner* (1989); *Momma and the Meaning of Life* (1999); *The Gift of Therapy: An open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and their Patients* (2002); *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).
- Emmy van Deurzen (1951–): *Everyday Mysteries: Existential dimensions of Psychotherapy* (1997); *Paradox and Passion in Psychotherapy* (1998); *Existential*

Counseling and Psychotherapy in Practice (1988); *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness* (2009).

- R. May (1953–): *The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective* (Schneider & May, 1995); *Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life* (Schneider, 2004); *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy: Guideposts to the Core of Practice* (2008); *Existential-humanistic therapy* (Schneider & Krug, 2010).

THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

As noted previously, there's no single theorist or theory of existential psychotherapy. Consequently, although we focus on key existential philosophical and phenomenological principles, other existential writers and theorists may emphasize principles slightly different from the following.

The I-Am Experience

The **I-am experience** is the experience of being, of existing (R. May et al., 1958). The experience of being is often referred to as **ontological experience** and means “to be” and *logical* means “the science of.” Literally, then, a major focus of existential therapy consists of exploring immediate individual human experience. You might think of it as suddenly waking up and being completely tuned into what it's like to be alive, to exist, to be here right now in this particular moment in time.

Existentialists like to use hyphens to capture the interconnectedness of phenomenological experience. For example, in contrast to May's I-am experience, Boss (1963) and Binswanger (1933) used *Dasein* (which is translated to being-in-the-world) to describe the sense-of-existence. Also, the phrase, “Dasein choosing,” which is translated to the-person-who-is-responsible-for-his-existence choosing is used. We should note that this practice is in no way related to our own hyphenated last names, although it has inspired John to consider using a hyphenated middle name so he can refer to himself in the third person as, “John-who-is-

responsible-for-his-existence-Sommers-Flanagan,” which he thinks sort of rolls right off the tongue.

It follows, as-if-anything-really-follows-from-the-preceding, that existential therapy is almost always in the service of self-awareness or self-discovery. However, unlike psychoanalysts, existentialists seek to expand client self-awareness rather than interpreting client unconscious processes. This is because existentialists believe the entirety of an individual's human experience is accessible to consciousness. It's not so much a matter of uncovering an elusive unconscious as it is a matter of elucidating the conscious and deepening the relational.

Four Existential Ways of Being

There are four primary existential ways of being-in-the-world. They include:

1. *Umwelt*: Being-with-nature or the physical world.
2. *Mitwelt*: Being-with-others or the social world.
3. *Eigenwelt*: Being-with-oneself or the world of the self.
4. *Uberwelt*: Being-with-the-spiritual or over world.

The first three of these existential ways of being were described by Boss (1963), Binswanger (1963), and May et al. (1958). The fourth way of being was added by van Deurzen (1988).

These four dimensions of existence are ubiquitous and simultaneous. Some people focus more on one dimension than others or shift from one to another depending on particular intentions or situations. For example, while on a mountain hike up the Stillwater gorge in Montana, it's difficult not to become profoundly into being-with-nature as water powerfully cascades around you, making all conversation (being with others) impossible. However, depending on other factors, this experience can take people inward toward *eigenwelt*, toward an *uberwelt* spiritual experience, or stimulate a deep *mitwelt* (albeit a nonverbal one). In most cases the

direction your being moves in a given situation is likely a combination of several factors, including anxiety, previous experiences, intention, and many other factors we discuss next.

The Daimonic

According to Rollo May, “The daimonic is any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person” (1969, p. 123, italics in original). *Daimon possession* has historically been used to explain psychotic episodes and is popularly referred to as *demonic possession*. However, May repeatedly emphasizes that daimonic and demonic are not the same concept, as in this response to criticism from Carl Rogers: “I never use the word demonic, except to say that this is not what I mean” (May, 1982, p. 11).

The **daimonic** includes both positive and negative potential. Similar to Jung’s more general conception of libido, it’s a form of psychic energy or an *urge* that’s the source of both constructive and destructive impulses. May describes the daimonic in greater detail: “The daimonic is the urge in every being to affirm itself, assert itself, perpetuate and increase itself. . . . [The reverse side] of the same affirmation is what empowers our creativity” (May, 1969, p. 123).

Again, just as Jung emphasized the integration of the shadow archetype, May considers the harnessing and integration of the daimonic to be a central task in psychotherapy. He views psychotherapy as an activity that plumbs the depths of an individual’s most basic impulses in an effort to acknowledge, embrace, and integrate every bit of being and energy into the whole person. May commented specifically about the need to integrate the daimonic and the danger of leaving it unintegrated:

If the daimonic urge is integrated into the personality (which is, to my mind, the purpose of psychotherapy) it results in creativity, that is, it is constructive. If the daimonic is not integrated, it can take over the total personality, as it does in violent rage or collective paranoia in time of war or compulsive sex or oppressive behavior. Destructive activity is then the result. (May, 1982, p. 11)

The goal then is to integrate the biological and natural daimonic urges in ways that maximize constructive and creative behavior. May (Schneider et al., 2009) discussed this in the context of what’s important in therapy:

A therapy that is important, as I see it, is a therapy that enlarges a person, makes the unconscious conscious. Enlarges our view, enlarges our experience, makes us more sensitive, enlarges our intellectual capacities as well as other capacities. (p. 420)

The Nature of Anxiety

Existential philosophy generally views anxiety as leading to authenticity and freedom (Wulfing, 2008). Following this tradition, R. May (1953) was perhaps the first modern mental health professional in the United States to conceptualize anxiety as a good thing. He emphasized that it was a normal and essential by-product of human existence. His formulation of anxiety encourages us to embrace it as a part of our experience. We should explore it, experience it, engage it, and redirect it into constructive activities—and we should definitely not seek to avoid it.

The existential perspective identifies two types of anxiety: **normal anxiety** and **neurotic anxiety**. Normal anxiety is directly proportional to the situation. It is a meaningful message within our awareness (not requiring repression or other defensive processes) and can be used creatively. In contrast, neurotic anxiety is disproportionate to the situation; it is usually repressed, denied, or otherwise avoided, and is not used for creative or constructive purposes. Instead, it is destructive.

For example, as you read this chapter, you may simultaneously be aware of mounting anxiety over time pressures in your life. Perhaps you need to finish reading this chapter and study for an exam in your theories class. You also need to finish writing a proposal for a research class. At the same time, you’re thinking about how you should get the oil changed in your car before your weekend road trip. In addition, you haven’t found anyone to take care of your dog while you’re away for the weekend. The pressure is rising.

If, in response to your pressure-packed situation, you respond by functioning creatively and efficiently, you're experiencing normal anxiety. Perhaps you decide to write your research proposal on an existential topic and hire your nephew to stay at your apartment and take care of your dog. You study as efficiently as you possibly can, and then get your oil changed on the way out of town. In the end, you heave a sigh of relief. You've faced your anxiety and dealt with the situation effectively.

In contrast, if you experience neurotic anxiety, you avoid facing your anxiety-provoking situation by going out and partying with your friends, blowing off your theories exam, writing up a minimal research proposal, and taking your misbehaving dog with you on the road in your car without rechecking the oil. The three key differences are (1) you deny the importance of your life demands, (2) you respond or react to the situation out of desperation, rather than responding proactively and with creativity, and (3) you end up increasing your chances of having difficulties down the road (literally) because you haven't responsibly maintained yourself (or your vehicle).

As the preceding example implies, existential treatment is not about doing away with normal anxiety; instead, the goal is to reduce neurotic anxiety. This is accomplished by helping clients live with and cope effectively and creatively with the normal anxiety that accompanies existence.

Normal and Neurotic Guilt

Guilt, like anxiety, has both positive and negative qualities. It may seem a bit odd, but guilt is good—normal guilt, that is. Guilt inspires people to act in thoughtful and conscientious ways. Normal guilt is like a sensor: When functioning well, it alerts us to what's ethically correct and guides us toward morally acceptable behavior.

Psychopathology arises, not from the human experience of normal guilt, but from **neurotic guilt**. Neurotic guilt usually consists of a twisted, exaggerated, or minimized version of normal guilt. For example, when a victim of domestic abuse feels guilty for provoking her abuser, it's a twisted guilt

and doesn't serve a productive purpose. Similarly, the abuser who feels only transient or minimal guilt after physically battering his romantic partner is neurotically denying or minimizing his personal responsibility. He may experience complete relief from guilt after delivering a quick apology and a dozen roses. Worse, he may relieve his guilt by blaming his partner and demanding an apology from her.

In contrast, some individuals feel massive guilt and responsibility for even the most minor, normal, human ethical transgressions. Excess guilt may make such people think they should be punished or make restitution for their unacceptable behaviors. For example, after making a mistake that cost her employer several hundred dollars, a guilt-ridden employee may commit unending hours of service to her employer, church, and community in an effort to relieve herself of her guilty feelings—and even then, the guilt feelings may continue.

Existential Psychodynamics

Similar to psychoanalytic theorists, existentialists believe humans are in conflict with powerful internal forces. However, instead of helping clients cope with instinctual drives or rework internalized object relations, existential therapists help clients face and embrace **existential psychodynamics** or "**ultimate concerns**" of existence (Yalom, 1980; Yalom, 1995). These ultimate concerns produce anxiety that must be dealt with either directly or indirectly via defense mechanisms (although for existentialists, defense mechanisms are not an elusive, automatic unconscious process, but a style or pattern of avoiding anxiety that can and should be brought to awareness).

In *Existential Psychotherapy*, Irving Yalom (1980) describes four ultimate concerns relevant to psychotherapy. These concerns are:

1. Death
2. Freedom
3. Isolation
4. Meaninglessness

These ultimate concerns capture the nature of reality for existentialists. Everyone who lives is confronted with real demands and truths inherent in human existence. In turn, we're free to choose our response to those demands and anxiety-producing truths.

Death

Yalom (1980) outlines two therapy-relevant propositions about death. First, he emphasizes that death and life exist simultaneously:

[D]eath whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct. (p. 29)

As a consequence, the possibility of death cannot be ignored. Any of us might suddenly face death in the next moment, next day, or next week—or we may live decades longer. Death is knowable and unknowable. We will die; it's only a question of when, where, and how. Death is one of life's realities.

Second, Yalom claims death is a "primordial source of anxiety" and therefore a main source of psychopathology (1980, p. 29). For anyone who has directly faced death, the potential influence of death anxiety is obvious. Years ago when I (John) was prematurely and inaccurately diagnosed as having cancer spreading throughout my body, I experienced several days of anxiety that I would prefer not to repeat. The continuous whirring of death to which Yalom refers became substantially louder. It was only after looking into the abyss of my own, possibly imminent death, that I could understand what it meant to directly encounter death anxiety—a phenomenon that I'd previously contemplated in only the most abstract and intellectual manner. The fortunate revision of my cancer diagnosis allowed the immediate anxiety to recede, but the experience left me with a greater appreciation of both life and death.

Despite the imposing and potentially debilitating fact that death is constantly rumbling beneath life's surface, confronting and dealing with death is also a potentially therapeutic mechanism of personal change. Yalom (1980) summarizes his existential perspective on this issue:

The matter can be summed up simply: "Existence cannot be postponed." Many patients with cancer report that they live more fully in the present. They no longer postpone living until some time in the future. They realize that one can really live *only* in the present; in fact, one cannot outlive the present—it always keeps up with you. Even in the moment of looking back over one's life—even in the last moment—one is still there, experiencing, living. The present, not the future, is the eternal tense. (p. 161)

The purpose of facing death for existentialists is to experience life more deeply and fully. To face death is to motivate oneself to drink with greater enthusiasm from the cup of life. This is *not* a call for morbid preoccupation about life's end, but instead a call to shed external trappings and roles and to live in the now as an individual self with freedom of choice. Research supports this idea that individuals can and do openly approach death by embracing the present and without increased emotional distress or mental disorders (Lichtenthal et al., 2009).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

A hospice chaplain told us that often, people with terminal diseases make peace with their impending death and their lives become more rich and full. In contrast, a famous Dylan Thomas poem urges, "Do not go gently into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Peace or resistance? Rage or acceptance? Where do you find yourself?

Freedom

Freedom is generally considered a positive condition of life, eagerly sought by many individuals. But this isn't the existentialist's view. Sartre believed humans are *condemned to freedom*, and existential therapists have followed suit by articulating the many ways in which freedom is an anxiety-laden burden (Sartre, 1971).

Personal responsibility is the first and primary burden of freedom. If you are free, you are simultaneously responsible. Every action becomes

choice. There is no one to blame for your mistakes. Perhaps you were misled and made a poor choice, but the fact is that *you* were a participant in the misleading. You cannot even defend yourself by employing the pesky Freudian unconscious. As Yalom (1980) states, "To a patient, who insists that her behavior is controlled by her unconscious, a therapist says, 'Whose unconscious is it?'" (p. 216).

Complete and total responsibility is inescapable. In the end, the more freedom you experience, the more choices you have; and the more choices you have, the more responsibility you have; and having a large load of responsibility translates into a large load of anxiety.

To make matters even more daunting, you're responsible not only for your choices, but also for your *nonchoices*. This is because every choice you make represents, at the same time, the death of hundreds of other possibilities. Yalom (1980) provides a personal example based on Sartre's existentialism:

There is, as I write, mass starvation in another part of the world. Sartre would state that I bear responsibility for this starvation. I, of course, protest: I know little of what happens there, and I feel I can do little to alter the tragic state of affairs. But Sartre would point out that I choose to keep myself uninformed, and that I decide at this very instant to write these words instead of engaging myself in the tragic situation. I could, after all, organize a rally to raise funds or publicize the situation through my contacts in publishing, but I choose to ignore it. I bear responsibility for what I do and for what I choose to ignore. Sartre's point in this regard is not moral: he does not say that I *should* be doing something different, but he says that what I *do* do is my responsibility. (p. 221)

Personal responsibility is a heavy burden to carry. It's so heavy that many individuals can't bear the weight. When the weight of personal responsibility is too heavy, individuals defend themselves with denial, displacement, and blaming. For example, when an employee underperforms, rather than claiming responsibility, he blames the situation ("I didn't have time to do a good job on the project") or a coworker ("Bob is impossible to work

with. How can I be expected to produce a quality product?") or his employer ("I'm not paid enough or given enough respect to work any harder than I'm working").

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Governments vary dramatically in the amount of individual freedoms available to citizens. States vary, cities vary, even families and couples vary in this domain. What makes freedom safe or dangerous within human groups? Should human freedom sometimes be limited?

Nearly everyone considers acceptance of personal responsibility to be a virtue. Sartre's "I am my choices" is roughly the equivalent of former U.S. President Harry Truman's "The buck stops here." Not surprisingly, if you meditate on this concept for a while, you're likely to end up feeling empowered, which is why existentialists doggedly come back to ultimate personal freedom. For them, the best and most direct route to personal empowerment is awareness of personal responsibility, including fully experiencing the angst that comes along with it.

Overall, the essential point of freedom and responsibility for the existentialist is this: You, and you alone, are the author of your experiences. Don't bother pointing the finger of blame toward anyone but yourself.

Isolation

The existential assumption is that every individual is fundamentally alone in this world. In Yalom's words, there is "an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being" (1980, p. 355). This is a terrible truth; we enter life as an individual being and we leave the same way. This is the nature of existential isolation.

There are also other, less deep and less permeating, forms of isolation. For example, many individuals who come for therapy come because of social problems that include feelings of disconnection and loneliness. In addition, some clients experience intrapersonal isolation, in that they feel

cut off from or out of touch with their sense of self. Although both of these forms of isolation are important in therapy, they're examples of surface symptoms rather than directly representative of existential psychodynamics.

The ideal or goal of existential therapy with respect to isolation is to help clients connect as deeply as possible with others while at the same time acknowledging their incontrovertible separateness. Yalom refers to this as a "need-free" relationship. Need-free relationships are unselfish relationships in which one person knows another person intimately, gives love without a personal agenda, and acknowledges the other's separateness and independence of thought. When a need-free relationship exists, both parties usually feel more alive and engaged in life (Yalom, 1980).

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher and theologian, has written extensively on the *I-Thou relationship* (Buber, 1970). An I-Thou relationship involves the deepest of all possible connections between two individuals. It's a completely mutual and celebratory relationship, in which both self and other are experienced fully. Unfortunately, according to Buber, legitimate I-Thou moments are rare and relatively brief. This is the relation toward which we should strive, but it's impossible to live consistently in an I-Thou connection.

The practical interpersonal problem faced by most of us is the problem of isolation versus fusion. Like a newborn baby, sometimes we luxuriate in the illusion that someone will anticipate and meet our every need. Or in the blush of powerful infatuation, we're intoxicated by the possibility of complete fusion with another individual. Sometimes, even a brief glimpse of the reality of our existential aloneness can cause us to cling to whatever potential love object may be in our vicinity, often with less than desirable outcomes.

Yalom claims that denial is the most common way that humans deal with the conflict between being an individual and experiencing frightening existential isolation. One of the most common forms of denying isolation is through love or fusion with another individual. In his book *Love's Executioner*,

Yalom (1989) complains of working with clients who are in love:

I do not like to work with patients who are in love. Perhaps it is because of envy—I, too, crave enchantment. Perhaps it is because love and psychotherapy are fundamentally incompatible. The good therapist fights darkness and seeks illumination, while romantic love is sustained by mystery and crumbles upon inspection. I hate to be love's executioner. (p. 15)

No doubt you've sometimes been around friends, relatives, acquaintances, or clients who desperately seek social or intimate contact. These individuals loathe being alone, and if they're in an intimate relationship that ends, they move quickly to replace their former partner. They haven't developed the inner strength, identity, and sense of completeness necessary to face the piercing anxiety associated with existential isolation. Instead, they frantically seek connection with others because doing so gives them at least a brief experience of completeness.

Earlier in this chapter we noted that the overarching goal of existential therapy is to help clients discover and explore their authentic self. We should extend that definition to include the discovery and exploration of the authentic and complete, individual self—separate from others.

When done correctly, heightening a client's awareness of existential isolation should improve his or her ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships. Similar to death anxiety and angst over the burden of personal freedom, getting in touch with and embracing existential isolation has a positive consequence. To admit and face aloneness gives us the strength to face the world and the motivation to relationally connect in deep and meaningful ways with other individuals.

Many individuals find the existential musings (especially Yalom's) about love and eternal aloneness to be rather depressive. Consequently, for a more uplifting existential perspective on love we offer one of Viktor Frankl's (1963) reflections while being prodded by the butts of Nazi rifles in Dachau:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many

poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. (p. 37)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Eastern philosophies often stress that our separations are illusions. We are all part of the great web of life. Does this argue against accepting and embracing our isolation? Is one view or the other true, or do they somehow both speak to ultimate reality?

Meaninglessness

The classic existential crisis or neurosis occurs when an individual faces the question “What is the meaning of my life?” Seeking life’s meaning can be agonizing. This is probably why it’s so easy for many of us to just stay busy on Facebook or with other distractions instead of grappling with life’s biggest question. Leo Tolstoy captures the pain and torment associated with thinking too much about the meaning of one’s life:

The question, which in my fiftieth year had brought me to the notion of suicide, was the simplest of all questions, lying in the soul of every man from the undeveloped child to wisest sage: “What will come from what I am doing now, and may do tomorrow? What will come from my whole life?” otherwise expressed—“Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything?” Again, in other words: “Is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?” (Tolstoy, 1929, p. 20)

Many existentialists would respond to Tolstoy with something along the lines of “Life has no

inherent meaning. It’s up to you to invent, create, or discover meaning in your life. Your challenge is to find meaning in an apparently meaningless world.”

To begin our discussion of meaninglessness, we should emphasize that, similar to the other ultimate concerns, meaninglessness should be confronted, embraced, and dealt with directly. Viktor Frankl has written of his own personal struggle with meaninglessness:

I gladly and readily confess that as a young man I had to go through the hell of despair over the apparent meaninglessness of life, through total and ultimate nihilism. But I wrestled with it like Jacob with the angel did until I could say “yes to life in spite of everything,” until I could develop immunity against nihilism. (Gould, 1993, p. 9)

Of all existential theorists, perhaps Frankl focused the most on living a meaningful life. He believed the “will to meaning” is a primary motive, surpassing the importance of Freud’s pleasure principle and Adlerian superiority striving. He also emphasized that, similar to Adler’s formulations of human motivation, meaning isn’t a drive or push; instead it is characterized by striving or willing.

Many clients come to therapy because they’re suffering from the absence of meaning in their lives. C. G. Jung also wrote about the preponderance of meaninglessness among clients with whom he worked:

Absence of meaning in life plays a crucial role in the etiology of neurosis. A neurosis must be understood, ultimately, as a suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning. . . . About a third of my cases are not suffering from any clinical definable neurosis but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives. (Jung, 1953, p. 83)

There is some research supporting Jung’s observation. In the face of personal loss, a sense of meaningfulness, religiosity, and spirituality are all predictive of positive mental health (Fry, 2000; Fry, 2001).