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THE PERSON OF THE THERAPIST

‘An act has no ethical quality whatever unless it be chosen out of several all equally possible.’

William James

WHO ARE YOU?

Existential psychotherapy is a relationship between two people. It is not a technical intervention but a human encounter, a meeting of souls in which both people are equally important and in which the quality of the relationship and the dialogue that ensues changes the way in which the world is understood and encountered. In existential therapy we start with the therapist. We train therapists to become self-reflective and to understand the problems and contradictions of human existence so that they can use themselves purposefully in the therapeutic relationship. It is important to begin by understanding the kind of person you are, and it is impossible to be a good existential therapist unless you have the willingness and ability to look into yourself before you look into other people’s lives. This is an ethical and practical principle. But a willingness to know yourself is not enough. You must also be prepared to face up to life’s complexity and grapple with the paradoxes and difficulties described in Chapter 1.

The existential therapist will know something about not just how to make sense of things but, even more anxiety provoking, they will know that the sense they make will only be provisional, temporary.

THE USE OF LIFE EXPERIENCE TO REFLECT ON LIFE AND ITS MEANINGS

What makes us special as human beings is our ability to reflect on our past, present and also our future, and this ability to understand life experience in time and also in space, in the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimensions, will contribute to our

ability to monitor ourselves for personal bias. Clients are entitled to have a therapist who has grappled with the issues and questions that life raises and to know that they will not impose their own views and opinions on them.

Although reflecting is something we do automatically, our conclusions are often mistaken either because they are so familiar and we think of them as normal, or because we would rather not examine them too closely because they evoke anxiety. The many ways we deceive ourselves about our experience and our personal responsibility by restricting our worldview is something we need to be alive to.

Existential therapists are likely to be people who have always spent time thinking about the world and their place in it. They are likely to have experimented and travelled and are certain to have been curious about other people and about their own motivations. In order to refine their understanding of all these things, they will have gone through a phase of reflection on life and their own conduct, their personal worldview, values and bias in one-to-one existential therapy. This allows them to fine-tune their vision about themselves and tune out any huge prejudices, presumptions and fears that might interfere with their clear perception of others. Supervision is a way of formalizing this professionally and continuing a process of self and life scrutiny during and after training. This is dealt with in greater depth in Chapter 8.

We tend to think that maturity comes with age, but existential maturity is not automatically linked with age because some younger people may have weathered greater storms and lived their relatively shorter lives with greater intensity than their elders and will therefore have understood more about existence and have matured into fuller human beings. Some people will never arrive at existential maturity, no matter what their age and experience.

The sort of maturity that is required for existential therapists will show itself in an ability to make room for all sorts of – even contradictory – opinions, attitudes, feelings, thoughts and experiences and to have the ability to integrate these into the person you are. You will have the ability to be uncertain, to feel that you do not have to know the answers to problems though you will keep searching.

Rather than clinging to one point of view, existential therapists will be able to oversee and evaluate reality from a range of perspectives and will have the ability to distinguish truth from lies as well as knowing when to be unsure. They will be able to tolerate the tension that awareness of such contradictions generates. They will be able to be in doubt.

There are a number of life experiences that are particularly helpful in preparing people for such maturation:

- ◆ Committing oneself to raising a family, or caring for dependents in a close relationship is instrumental in discovering the nature of love.
- ◆ Becoming a parent or a stepparent enables a person to see life from the point of view of a father or mother as well as a son or daughter. This can help people understand both how rewarding and also how difficult parenting can be. Some women have little academic schooling but great practical experience in this area. This may be the same for men who have taken responsibility for childcare. Such experience is invaluable.

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- ◆ Being immersed in society from several angles, in different jobs, different academic studies, different social classes and so on is a definite advantage.
- ◆ Cross-cultural experience is also an excellent way to stretch the mind and to provide multiple views on what it means to be human. Spending some time living in another country is a good way to appreciate that there are different ways of living. People who have had to adjust their way of perceiving and dealing with the world, especially when this includes a change of language, have had the all-important experience of questioning previous assumptions and opening up to a new culture and perspective.
- ◆ People coming to psychotherapy as a second career are often especially suitable because they have had the experience of wishing to change their life direction and also having the courage to make the change.
- ◆ The sine qua non of becoming an existential therapist is to have negotiated a number of significant crossroads in one's personal life. Nothing opens a person more to the mysteries and possibilities of being than to witness birth, suffering, loss and death.

Many existential therapists have first awoken to their interest in human difficulties and the uncertainties of life when they were confronted with a crisis in their own life. Far from adversity being a negative, it is the condition for the kind of mellowing and maturing that is required of someone who takes the role of therapist and facilitator of life understanding.

EXERCISE

Take a few minutes to write down for yourself what you think has been a significant experience of existential crisis, in which you initially thought you might flounder and lose your foothold in reality but then discovered that you were able to let yourself be transformed and transfigured by it instead. How did you let yourself trust the experience and how were you able to let it help you to bend rather than break? What of this experience will help you be a therapist?

The moral stance that existential therapists take is that they would not expect clients to commit to greater depth and intensity than they are prepared to commit to themselves.

Therefore trainees need to commit to a therapy of their own in which they take the opportunity to plumb the depth of their own heart and soul and come to terms with their own conflicts and contradictions. An existential therapist will actively engage with such personal therapy to find out its possibilities and limitations and know for themselves the doubts that need to be faced and the prejudices and assumptions that need to be explored.

KEY POINTS

Although effective existential therapists will be skilful practitioners, it is more important that they have the ability to learn from life experience. Continuing to live reflectively and with awareness is the best way of becoming a good existential therapist.

BEING-WITH: RECIPROCITY, COLLABORATION AND TRUST

As we saw in Chapter 1, human beings are always in relation to others as well as in relation to things, themselves and ideas. Sartre pointed out that there are two ways to be with others, competitively or cooperatively. And there are three ways of being competitive:

- ◆ We can aim for dominance, controlling or subjecting the other and fighting when this does not work. In this case, relationships are seen as something to ‘win at’.
- ◆ We can aim to be submissive, letting ourselves be controlled, placating the other, often trying to soothe them or meet their needs at the exclusion of our own. In this case, we see relationships as something to ‘lose at’ or ‘suffer in’.
- ◆ We can merely withdraw from all relationships, refusing to ‘play the game’. We can withhold affection and pretend we do not value the company of others. This is usually the last move in a competitive game in which we feel hopelessly inadequate and have been hurt too much to try again.

Cooperative relationships, on the contrary, are relationships in which we dare to put ourselves at the disposal of the creation of something of value. We work together and we respect each other’s needs without feeling obliged to meet them. Such relationships are characterized by the following traits:

- ◆ We feel we are able to give generously without counting the cost, for we have faith that the other will do likewise.
- ◆ We are constantly exploring the differences and similarities between us and make room for the complementarity this affords: we make the most of the additional strength we get from each other.
- ◆ We work with an unwritten rule of reciprocity: we are aware that we cannot just take over shared space and time but need to mind both our own and the other’s needs and be equitable in dividing up available resources.
- ◆ We seek to proceed on a collaborative basis, where each does as much as they can, putting their talents at the disposal of the couple, or group, to the best of their ability, rather than in an attempt to rival or compete with others and while gratefully receiving other contributions as well.

Clearly cooperative relationships can never be taken for granted and are for ever at risk of becoming competitive as soon as one or all partners in the relationship feel short-changed or overpowered and therefore threatened in their safety rather than upheld by each other. This is particularly so in existential couple and group therapy, which is talked about in Chapter 8.

EXERCISE

Reflect on these questions:

- Are you competitive or cooperative?
- Do you tend to engage in competition or do you tend to avoid it?
- What is it like to win?
- What is it like to lose?
- What is your earliest memory of winning and losing?

Now ask someone who knows you very well, what their experience of you is.

As therapists, we need to learn how to be with others cooperatively rather than competitively, otherwise we cannot be fully available to our clients. But of course we need to be capable to stand firm and to face conflict as well. Being a therapist is not just about being positive, caring and empathic.

There often is confusion about the role of empathy in existential work. It was the existential philosopher Jaspers who first promoted the idea of empathy, as a way of 'feeling into' another's experience. He said that therapists need to dare to participate in the client's experience, resonating with it as fully as they can. We need to watch we do not confuse empathy with either sympathy or identification. Sympathy is when we feel similarly as someone else, simply because we have had similar experiences. Identification is when we assume that the other is like us, when often they are very different. In both these cases we have lost track of the difference between the client and ourselves and we are not paying full attention to the client's actual experience. While we can never feel what the client is feeling, what we can do is to take their experience into ourselves and engage and resonate with it. That this is not fool-proof is frequently evident when we discover that what we thought our clients meant was wrong and that we had not fully understood their experience. Our capacity for resonance has to be honed constantly. In that process the client is constantly presented with opportunities to tell more about themselves until we get it. This process requires us to be fully present: co-present with the other and to take part in the therapeutic encounter as a fully engaged human being. Once we have let ourselves be affected by the other's experience of the world, we can hear and understand them inwardly, from the depth of our own experience. This will give us a much sharper perspective on the issues they bring, not by identifying, sympathizing or even empathizing with the other, but rather by applying the reality of the other's existence to ourselves in a real and truthful manner. We do not do this in order to solve the other's problem for them, by

jumping in for them, but to get the philosophical sense and deeply felt experience of the situation that provides us with the long view. From here we can jump ahead for them and so reveal the totality of the experience. Of course this has to be done carefully and gently and with great attention to the relationship that is evolving. It is a given that relationships are difficult. The therapeutic relationship is no exception.

It is what clients come to talk about most and they are difficult because of our co-constituted nature, the fact that we are both individual and together. Even a hermit is aware of the absence of others and his identity is as a person-without-others. We are defined by the way in which others relate to us and the way in which we relate to others. In the contemporary world of constant personal and electronic communication there is no way in which we can escape from each other.

Existential therapy emphasizes the cooperative nature of the work. It is therefore crucial that existential therapists practice cooperative relationships, outside the consulting room as well as inside because if a person is not able to be collaborative in daily life, it is unlikely they will be able to do so as therapists.

Existential therapists will have a clear knowledge from their own experience of what can go wrong in relationships but perhaps more importantly what can go right, and also what they can do to make one into the other and how to tell the difference.

They will know that trust will not grow without risk and without being tested. They will have learnt to judge when a situation can be trusted and when it cannot.

Although it may not seem obvious, it is important to know that gaining and losing trust is active rather than passive. Very simply, trust is gained by being consistent and doing what we say we will do at the time we promised. Mistrust comes out of our disappointment when people are not true to their word or circumstances do not meet our expectations.

This reflects directly on our work as therapists because our clients trust us when they dare to risk telling us something that is important and find out it is treated with respect, interest and understanding. It creates a new sense of hope for them. The principle of trust building is the glue that maintains and deepens relationships and our sense of belonging.

In therapy, we must remember that although reciprocal, the relationship is not equal. The therapist and client are there for different purposes and are in different roles. Many of the breaches of ethics acted on by professional organizations are because of therapists mistakenly seeing reciprocity as meaning equality. Because clients come to therapists in a vulnerable position, we need to respect this and not expect them to respond as vigorously to our interventions as a friend or partner would. We need to give them the leeway to explore themselves without having to defend their behaviour and experience from us.

The personal and the political

Being-with is not just about close relationships; it has a political dimension too. We have an inbuilt capacity to form groups and all groups need rules to operate by. The existential therapist will therefore understand their reciprocal relationship with the world and will often take an active part in political life, whether through professional, community or party politics.

The personal is intertwined with the political, and most of Sartre's plays explore this relationship. For people to be able to change for the better they need to know that the world around them will have a chance of changing for the better too. We are interlinked with our social environment and are as much influenced by it as we can in turn influence it.

Many people have criticized the political stances of Heidegger and Sartre among others, and Heidegger's Nazi affiliation with particularly good reason, but what is not in doubt is that these philosophers were deeply engaged politically and dared to live their lives in accordance with their own beliefs. In doing so, they made mistakes, from which they learnt and which remind us not to blindly follow their authority.

It is a part of our responsibility as a member of a community to vote in elections and this is one of the practical meanings of being-in-the-world, of living existentially. Some people may, of course, opt for abstention from this process and set themselves apart from society. This needs to be understood in terms of what it means to the person who gives up belonging to the wider world of society or who gives up having an effect on it.

KEY POINTS

- Respecting someone's autonomy means to be able to accept them because of their differences rather than in spite of them.
- Without reciprocity and cooperation, the fabric of society will collapse and we will lose our individual and collective humanity and identity.
- Existential therapists explore personal, social, cultural and political relationships in equal measure.

CAPACITY FOR SELF-RELIANCE AND INDIVIDUALITY

In order to feel at ease in their personal world, people seek self-reliance. What is less obvious is that they will only acquire self-reliance through engagement with their own struggles in life. True self-reliance will mean that the person can be happy to be in their own company, and also that they are able to enjoy deeper personal relations with close friends and family members, rather than more shallow relationships with many people. This is another example of the both/and. The closer we are to ourselves, the more we are at ease in intimate relationships.

This results in being more able to get better at judging which relationships will be mutually nourishing and to know how to make them deeper and more trusting. This cannot be done without understanding that being autonomous does not mean being a loner, and it also does not mean simply reacting against what others believe. It means freeing yourself to be part of a group without losing your sense of self. People who can do this may seem at first glance to be quite ordinary people but they will have worked out not just what they believe, but also how to work out what to believe in

unexpected situations. They are independent but not isolated. They are, in fact, non-conformists in the best sense. Often they will have an ability to see something as if they've never seen it before and although it may come across as ignorance or naïvety, it is in fact openness and an ability to tolerate uncertainty.

Another aspect of self-reliance and individuality is that financial independence, the ability to look after oneself materially, to work, to make a living and live within one's means, is a characteristic of healthy living. They will also know that financial independence is something valuable for the client to strive towards. Although often not given much importance in therapy, it is equivalent in importance to becoming reliable and trustworthy in human relationships.

Humour

Humour can be used to connect or to distance. Therapists' sense of humour will not be used to distance, confuse or put down and it will not be tinged with bitterness, contempt or cynicism. The existential therapist's sense of humour will be used sparingly and often to emphasize the irony and tragedy of existence which they are a part of. If clients feel that they are being made fun of or their issue is being made light of, the therapy will be undermined and trust will be lost. When a client frequently uses humour to talk about themselves, therapists need to probe for the reasons for this distancing and this casual view of themselves. It may be that the client has achieved a warm and generous but objective view of themselves, but it may also be that they are in the habit of putting themselves down before somebody else does.

KEY POINTS

- Self-reliance means being able to value your own company as well as that of others.
- Self-reliance comes from learning to trust your own ability to look after yourself and share with others.
- Humour is a valuable but sensitive ally to therapy and needs to be scrutinized for its meanings.

TRANSPARENCY AND WISDOM

Other therapeutic perspectives do not systematically explore people's experience of the sacred or the spiritual. When we talk about transparency, we refer to the spiritual dimension of existence and the ability to see all the parts of life as connected and equally significant. Transparency requires us to be open to our inner thoughts, feelings, sensations and intuitions, and also to the facts of life. To be prepared to face truth, no matter what it is or what it leads us to. This takes humility and courage. It also takes considerable insight and understanding of one's own worldview and ideology.

In everyday life we all struggle with opposing forces of good and evil, meaning and meaninglessness, and often take cover by opting for one side or the other or by dodging or fudging the issue entirely. The principle of transparency, which consists of making ourselves available to all that is, can guide our search for truth. It demands that we no longer see ourselves as the centre of the universe but as part of a greater complexity to which we belong and owe our lives. This is by no means easy because it involves abandoning some beliefs that give the illusion of safety. It is easy to say clichés like ‘life is what you make it’ or ‘it takes all sorts to make a world’, and these are no less true for being clichés, but they are much harder to actually live by. People who say them a lot are more likely to be trying to persuade themselves or others than accepting and opening themselves to what is the case. Phrases of this sort in therapy are likely to shut down an examination of the mystery of life.

Transparency and wisdom also relate to how existential thinkers see the ‘self’ not as a thing but as a process. Using the metaphor of the eye, much Western thinking as reflected in psychotherapy theories sees the self as something relatively fixed and internal that is illuminated when light comes in. Existentially, the self is much more like the iris of the eye that lets in the light of existence. The metaphor of sight is not about looking at the world, it is about letting the world in and being connected to it.

When we open our metaphorical ‘iris’ we are able to ‘see’ the world clearly and transparently, in its multidimensional glory, and we are also able to see our place in it and what we can contribute to it. We have to aspire to be as transparent and open as possible so that ‘light’, existence, can shine in. When this happens, the person can simultaneously and reciprocally be lit up and light up the world.

This is what it means to be a part of the world, to be-in-the-world. From this position of being a part of the world while also being of it and being for it, we can contemplate human existence in a much more philosophical manner. We gain perspective on what truly matters and what is incidental.

EXERCISE

Transparency and wisdom could hardly be put better than by the social and ethical philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), who asked us to have: ‘the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’

Think of something in your current life that you want to change and something you want to learn to accept because you know it will remain the same.

KEY POINTS

- Human beings are able to choose when to be open and connected or closed and disconnected.
- It is the active reaching for truth that gives life its meaning, not the finding.

WHO ARE YOU AS A THERAPIST?

Working as an existential therapist makes particular demands on the person. The necessity for a person to know how to make sense of their own life is at the centre of existential philosophy and practice, and the person will need to be able to make full use of their available personal and professional resources in order to function as an existential therapist.

SURVIVING AS AN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Being an existential psychotherapist can be a lonely job, and private practice can make it even lonelier if it leads to a reduced social world. We need to know what to do in order to survive as a therapist and as a person, for existentially the two are indivisible.

Many existential psychotherapists come to the work from another profession. This is always valuable since it means they have a broader view of human existence. But in order to be effective they need to continue having other interests and commitments in their lives.

If a therapist cannot do this, they will find that they are using their clients to meet the needs that their own interests and personal relationships should be meeting. For the short time we meet our clients they have an absolute right to our full attention but they also need to be assured, though not necessarily explicitly, that we have a productive and stimulating life outside the consulting room. Many existential psychotherapists maintain a parallel career in a separate but related field, and this enhances rather than dilutes their work as therapists. Also it seems that a comparatively large number of existential therapists are also active in the arts. This too can only enhance their work as therapists.

In case all this sounds too idealistic, existential therapists are aware that they are first and foremost human beings and are therefore susceptible to human flaws, imperfections, blind spots, conflicts and dilemmas. They are familiar with feelings like anxiety, guilt, distress, joy and sadness, but there is also a likelihood that they may understand how these things are part and parcel of being alive and that it is possible to make sense of them and that therapists diminish themselves if they try to eliminate them.

Supervision has a part to play but more important to survival is the ability to monitor ourselves for personal bias and hence to learn from experience. It is about knowing when we are functioning below par and when we need a break.

KEY POINTS

- We all need a time to forget there is such a thing as existential psychotherapy.
- We can only help others to live full lives if we live a full life ourselves.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL THERAPY IN YOUR TRAINING

The issue of the place of personal therapy as a part of training has a particular meaning for existential therapists. There can be no doubt that to be an existential therapist you have to be prepared to scrutinize yourself and to learn as much about living as is possible. It is not sufficient simply to experience life: you have to systematically reflect on it and learn from ongoing experience as well. To have a special mentor, in the form of a therapist, with whom you can discuss your own questions about life and your own role in it, is just as necessary as to study the philosophers, psychologists and novelists who have created the ideas and theories that help us to understand human nature and the human condition. While we learn a great deal about how to be a therapist from our experience as a client, it is also necessary to learn essential skills in sessions of practical training and then to practise these in a wide variety of contexts and with many different clients under supervision.

KEY POINTS

- Existential training involves becoming familiar with both philosophical and psychological theories.
- It also involves skills training and supervised practice.
- An existential analysis requires active reflection on your life experience.
- Therapy for you as a therapist is about taking the time to learn about your life in a disciplined way.

ONLINE CONTENT

- ◆ Talk by Emmy van Deurzen on self-reflection.
 - ◆ Interview with Iro Ioannou, a newly qualified existential therapist, about why she chose the existential perspective and her experience of training.
 - ◆ Interview with an experienced practitioner, Dr Martin Milton, about the importance of the political dimension of the existential perspective.
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