**Existential therapy**

**Brief introduction**

This therapy laid extraordinary emphasis on the nature of human personality as a whole. Other therapies were aimed at addressing the maladjustments and mental illnesses but it specifically focused on the aspirations, capacities and limitations of individuals in the most balanced way. Due to these components, this approach shares super-colossal similarities with other psychotherapeutic approaches such as relational, depth, experiential and humanistic psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980). This therapy emphasizes on the free-will, meaningfulness, and self determination—often focusing on whole humanness rather than a single symptom. This approach favors the capacity to explore rational choices and generate maximum potential to overcome potential threats to wellbeing (Yalom, 1980).

**Main body**

**Foundation stone**

Existential therapy was developed in response to the philosophy of holistic wellbeing propounded by Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche who were in view that internal wisdom and coping is the only way to overcome human discontent. Later on, the idea of *existentialism* was further elaborated by Nietzsche who was a notable proponent of personal responsibility and free will. Further, Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger contributed to this approach through exploring the role of interpretation and investigation in the process of healing. After the next several decades of early 1900s, other contemporaries appeared and attempted to explore the significance of understanding of experiencing as a method of achieving balance and psychological wellness (Prochaska & Norcross, 2003).

This discipline was actively pursued by Otto Rank till the twentieth century whereas Rollo May and Paul Tillich were two of the therapists who brought this therapy in mainstream through their teachings and writings by the middle of 20th century. After this deliberate literary working, this therapy influenced other therapies such as Victor Frankl’s logo-therapy and humanistic psychology. Furthermore, Philadelphia Association—aimed at helping individuals to manage their mental health disorders—also expanded the scope of existentialism when British philosophers used experiential therapies to treat above mentioned patients. Society for Existential Analysis (1988) and International Community of Existential Counselors (2006) were some other institutions that embodied the theory of existentialism into practice.

**Fundamental Principles**

The fundamental principles of existential therapy emphasize the existence of givens—certain innately predisposed intra-psychic conflicts in human existence formed in response to the interaction with particular conditions. Four primitive existential givens include: meaninglessness, isolation, death and freedom with associated responsibility. Existential therapists state that whenever an individual encounters aforementioned conditions, he is filled with a type of fear or dread typically referred to as “existential anxiety” (Prochaska & Norcross, 2003). This anxiety is having quite detrimental effects on individual’s personality because it reduces his spiritual, social, psychological and physical awareness leading to long term consequences. For example, it is a proven fact that we all have to die at some unknown time; this might act as a source of immense anxiety for him and his awareness of death as an integral part of human reality is diminished to great extent. Under the influence of this ignorance, one fails to make important decisions that ensure the safeguard of individuals. On the other hand, those who are excessively conscious about the reality (death) might develop psychosis or neurosis (Yalom, 1980).

Hence, the key of existential therapy is to maintain a balance between being overly aware and ignorant about reality principles. Those who become successful in maintaining balance between these two extremes make such decisions that influence their lives positively. In essence, we are encouraged to take opportunities when we realize the importance of death thinking that life is a blessing and a treasure of God to us. Likewise, weighty responsibilities to make life-changing decisions, the threat of isolation and perceived meaninglessness in life are some other sources of acute existential anxiety. According to the theories of existential therapy, the fashion in which individual operates these internal conflicts and makes relevant decisions determine the present and future circumstances of individual.

**Therapy process**

Therapists who embrace existential therapy focus less on the past of individual because only present is important in exploring and discovering choices that ensure his wellbeing in future. Past of the individual is only discussed to understand the implications of choices and beliefs that help creating profound insight into the self (Hoffman, 2017). For that matter, therapists and clients work collaboratively through retrospection. The past is used as a tool to promote newfound assertiveness and freedom. Only those individuals who intend to explore the underlying reasons for intra-psychic conflicts and associated decisions that affected their current situation can benefit from this therapy. Research studies demonstrated that various mental health and behavioral issues can successfully be treated using this therapeutic approach including post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, interpersonal violence and life threatening experiences (Hoffman, 2017). Individuals who benefit from the treatment find it easier to realize the purpose and meaning in their lives and often encounter increased self respect, self understanding, self awareness and elevated self awareness. This is because existential therapy makes them realize that they are solely responsible for their own state of mind and recovery which increases the likelihood of people to see treatment as much more than just recovery and therapeutic process. It is based on the following assumptions: All individuals possess innate capacity of self-awareness; every person is having a peculiar identity which can be estimated through the nature of interpersonal relationship with other individuals; individual must re-create themselves continually because meaning of life is in constant flux and is highly dynamic in nature and anxiety is an integral part of human conditions (Ackerman, 2017).

**Effectiveness**

As mentioned earlier, existential therapy is focused on the anxiety that is developed in response to the confrontation with inherited conflicts and the role of therapist is to minimize his anxiety and to foster his personal responsibility in making ultimate decisions. For example, Yalom theorized the role of therapist as a *fellow traveler* that supports in eliciting choices and insights in clients using empathy and non-judgmental attitude. Although a range of approaches are used in existential psychotherapy yet major themes centralize their focus on freedom and responsibility (Hoffman, 2017). Therapist helps the client finding out meaning when he is completely doomed by anxiety through thinking and acting responsibly and encountering devastating internal thoughts rather than expecting something from external forces such as luck or societal pressure. Existential therapists were in view that transformation is the ultimate goal of therapy which is attained through fostering free will, love, authenticity and creativity (Ackerman, 2017). Hence, this therapy can yield better results for those who want to gain a deeper state of wellbeing which is much more than just getting treated for prospective symptoms.

**Conclusion**

For better results, therapists usually combine this therapy with other talk therapies in order to make the client successful in finding purpose, meaning, job and unique goal of life. It recognizes the fact that life is not just a series of disjointed and unrelated unpropitious happenings rather our present and future circumstances are directly related to the decisions that we made in the past. Besides this, it targets cognitive and behavioral maladjustments due to which primary issues are not directly addressed by this therapy hence combining other approaches with this therapy helps yielding maximum effectiveness and promoting great and paced recovery. In addition, penetrative and in-depth approach which is used to explore the intra-psychic elements in existential therapy may not be appealing for some clients who do not favor such exploration and only want to fix their mental health issues quickly.

References

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