

Existential Givens Homeworks

HW #1: DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS ASSIGNMENT! I have a method for giving you credit for your work that will protect your confidentiality, which I will explain later. Write AT LEAST 1 full paragraph on the following question:

You find out that you only have 1 month to live. There is NOTHING you can do to change this. What would you do? How would you live your life in this last month?

NOTE: I will collect and read all of these out loud in class. YOU MUST HAVE THIS ON PAPER AND IN HAND AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CLASS TO GET CREDIT.

HW #2: Read accompanying handout on Existential Givens. After reading about these 6 Existential Givens, complete the following:

1. Write a 1-2 sentence summary definition of each of the 6 existential givens. Make sure to capture what these ideas mean in an *existential* sense as opposed to what they usually mean.
2. Choose any 2 of the existential givens. For each of the 2 you choose, write a paragraph about this existential given in your own life. How have you ignored, or denied, or tried to escape facing the existential given in your every day life? And / Or... How have you faced or embraced this existential given in your every day life?

Existential Psychology

Below is a discussion of the existential “givens” of existence according to Irvin Yalom and other existential psychologists. The idea is that our psychological health, or lack thereof, is dependent upon our willingness to accept and encounter these givens head on, rather than deny their existence. For Yalom and others, psychological disorders stem most often from a denial or repression, not of our instinctual urges, but the basic facts of existence.

From **Baseball Fan Loyalty and the Pillars of Existence** by C. Daniel Crosby

Death

Death is perhaps the most obvious and most important of the four existential givens. Like all living beings, humans are subject to death, despite our wish to live and persist in our own being. However, unlike other living things, we have an awareness of the brevity and fragility of our lives, a concept which can either lead us to live more fulfilled lives, or to cope maladaptively with the inevitability of our own demise. Our simultaneous wish to live and knowledge that we will someday die, has serious negative implications if handled incorrectly. Existential theorists believe that we erect defenses against death awareness, and that some of these defenses are denial-based, pathological and may have consequences on character development (May & Yalom, 1989). Optimally, an individual will confront the imminence of their own death, and use this as a “boundary experience” that will promote a life more passionately and fully lived. As Yalom points out in *The Gift of Therapy* (2002), “though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us (p. 126).”

Freedom

Freedom, in the existential sense, is different than the freedom we typically speak of. Typically, we do not think of freedom as a source of anxiety. In America, freedom is spoken of in reverent terms and is largely seen as what undergirds the greatness of our country. However, freedom in the existential sense, refers to the “groundlessness” of our existence, and our attendant responsibility to create a meaningful worldview. As May and Yalom state (1989), “Freedom refers to the fact that the human being is responsible for and the author of his or her own world, own life design, own choices and actions (p.377).” Simply put, life does not come with an instruction manual, which then makes it our responsibility to mold and shape our lives in meaningful ways. The anxiety that comes with the realization of this freedom, can either embolden us to move forward, proactively shaping a world in which to operate, or can be debilitating in that we realize that, in a real sense, the weight of the world is upon us. As Soren Kierkegaard famously said, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”

As a reaction to the groundlessness of existence, people often cling to form and structure, commonly in the form of religious and political ideologies or organizational structures... Part and parcel of our personal freedom is the responsibility that comes with it to create a personality. Far different from more biologically deterministic models of personality, existentialism proposes that each of us is “contextually agentic”, meaning that we can create a personality within the parameters of certain contextual variables (e.g. – genetic endowments, culture). While this possibility is heartening, it can also be daunting, as we realize that we cannot wholly hide behind faulty genes or bad parenting as excuses for

why we behave in certain ways. Again, given the difficulty of this task, humanity has often taken symbolic shortcuts en route to personality construction. For instance, owning a Rolls Royce makes symbolic statements about who we are that largely circumvent the arduous process of “from scratch” personality construction. If I own a Rolls Royce, others may assume that I am intelligent, wealthy, or industrious. Of course, they may also assume that I am pompous and frivolous, but the point remains; we associate ourselves with symbols and organizations that serve as heuristic shortcuts for making judgments about our personalities and those of others we come in contact with.

Meaninglessness

As Yalom states in his treatise on existential therapy (1981), we are meaning seeking creatures born into a meaningless world. Each of us needs a *raison d’etre* but life is largely formless and allows us to create (or not create) a personal meaning that will guide our own earthly travails. Perhaps no other existential psychotherapist has spoken as poetically and as powerfully about the power of meaning as Viktor Frankl. Relating his experiences in the concentration camps of World War II, Frankl speaks to the power of the human spirit when motivated by an overarching purpose in life (2000). Rather than giving in to the absurd tragedy of his experience, Frankl maintained personal meanings such as his love of God, and his desire to teach future generations that saw him through the terrors of Auschwitz. Commonly repeating Nietzsche’s words (as quoted in Frankl, 2000), “He that has a ‘why’ to live can bear with almost any ‘how’”, Frankl became the living embodiment of the power of aligning oneself with something grander than oneself.

Specialness

Going along with Meaninglessness, we must come to grips with the idea that we are not special as individuals. From Yalom’s *Love’s Executioner*: “*Specialness* is the belief that one is invulnerable, inviolable – beyond the laws of ordinary biology and destiny. At some point in life, each of us will face some crisis: it may be a serious illness, career failure, or divorce; or... it may be an event as simple as a purse snatching, which suddenly lays bare one’s ordinariness and challenges the common assumption that life will always be an eternal upward spiral” (pg. 7).

From T.S. Corso’s “On the Basic Assumptions of Existential Psychotherapy”

Uncertainty

Uncertainty is one of the most unsettling and anxiety provoking 'givens' of existence, and one of the issues most present in the therapy room. At the end of a therapy session when my client says 'see you next week' I sometime respond with the same phrase, yet I feel a little uncomfortable about saying it. Will I see you next week? How do I know? How do you know? We don't. We assume it. There is no guarantee that either of us will be there. Events out of our control can impede our next meeting. Thinking about it I will not say it anymore. I will just nod. (Fulfilling a popular cliché about therapists!)

Living with the uncertainty of the future is difficult, at times unbearable; and the quest for certainty is in vain. Yet, certainty is one of the most sought after state of being. Looking for a condition that is impossible to achieve is a waste of energy, yet this particular expenditure soars high in most people's life.

Attempting to gain control over one's life is to a certain extent a natural and sensitive response to this 'given' of existence. We try to minimise the risks by increasing the level of 'safety'. 'Minimise' and 'level' are relative terms, and the only terms we can use in conjunction with the concept of 'safety', or 'certainty'. They both elude us. And the more they elude us the more we seek them out. Because we want to feel 'safe', we want to feel 'certain'. It's a natural quest. It's part of our survival instinct.

However, when the quest for 'safety' or 'certainty' is taken to extremes it can become an obstacle to personal growth, to experiencing a greater range of experience and to live life to the maximum of one's possibilities. It becomes life diminishing.

To become aware of the consequences of one's attitude to this inevitable fact of life can be an eye opening experience. Or a mere intellectual exercise. It depends on the strength of the person and on the level of risk that one is prepared to take, which are objects of the therapeutic work. It follows that the acceptance of the impossibility of absolute 'certainty' or 'safety', and a change of attitude towards these issues, can take place within the context of the therapeutic work on the whole person. Like any other issue.

Relationships

Existential psychotherapy focuses on relationships. The relationship with the people in our lives, with the animal and natural world, the relationship between *therapist* and *client* and the relationship with our selves are the core of the therapeutic work.

Relationships are another 'given' of our existence, for we always find ourselves in some form or another of relation. As Heidegger says we live in a world-with-other beings, and we are interdependent. From the moment we are born we find ourselves in a relation, and utterly helpless and dependent on our mother, father, or substitute for them. We slowly become independent from our parents, but for as long as we live in a world-with-others we never become totally independent, as our world always entails the presence of other people. Our survival, our physical, emotional and social well being, depends on our interdependence. Hence, the quality of our relationships is of the utmost importance to leading a harmonious life in a world with others. Therefore, in *Existential therapy* the exploration of personal relationships is of fundamental importance.

Difficulties in interpersonal relationships are one of the most common reasons that bring people to *therapy*. We carry with us the traces of our life's experiences. Sorrow, suffering, traumas and other painful experiences have a tremendous impact on the way we relate to people, and to our selves, and bring about obstacles to establishing satisfactory relationships. These obstacles enter the room and impinge on the very relationship between *client* and *therapist*. In other words, the therapeutic relationship mirrors the relational difficulties that the individual encounters in the outside world, and it becomes a tool to identify and remove the individual's problems.