

Psychotherapy Guidebook

**EXISTENTIAL-  
HUMANISTIC  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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# **Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy**

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## Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

# Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy

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## DEFINITION

Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy is an approach aiding persons to live more fully and (if they choose) to explore some of the transpersonal possibilities that are latent in being human. It involves a very intense relationship, great commitment to the work and purposes of the therapy, and a readiness to make major life changes. Its primary functions are: a) to identify and reduce or eliminate the constrictions that limit the client's realization of his deeper potential and b) to aid the client in rediscovering and increasing the power of the inward searching capacity that is native to each of us.

## HISTORY

This approach is rooted in the work of the existentialists (e.g., Heidegger, Boss, May, Koestenbaum) and the humanistic psychologists (James, Kelly, Rogers, Buhler, Jourard, and so on). Its existentialism consists in a continual grounding of theory, postulations, and method in the simplest givens of being as these are apparent to an unsophisticated (but aware) observer: human

beings are conscious, finite, able to act or not to act, confronted with inexorable choice, at once part of all other beings and apart from them, and embodied. We all learn a way of seeing the world and of identifying ourselves that we are told is “reality.” This purported reality is often conflict-filled and limits vitality. It overemphasizes (at least in our culture) the objective and the environmental at the expense of the subjective and the creative potential of the individual. Psychotherapy that is to be truly liberating must call into question the life of the individual and the constraints on that life.

Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy is human-centered in values, holding that the fullest possible realization of human potential is a primary good, that each human being is ultimately worthy of trust when released from destructive interpretations of his own nature and of the world, that the route to such release is that of a mutually respecting and caring relationship in which one learns to use the potential that is native to us all but frequently submerged.

## TECHNIQUE

Technique, in the Existential-Humanistic view, is regarded as distinctly secondary to the accomplishment of three main purposes:

1. Development of client commitment to thorough, life-changing inner exploration in a setting characterized by authentic mutual

respect, caring and honesty.

2. Attainment by the client of discipline and skill in the process of inward searching — a process that can revitalize life during and after psychotherapy.
3. Perseverance by the client through the anxiety and anguish of relinquishing the structures of personal and world identity with which life formerly was organized, and confronting and incorporating the essential openness of being (the existential crisis).

There is, as with all matured perspectives, an important body of implementing methodology. This has some roots in psychoanalytic procedure, as it recognizes the importance of dealing with the resistances to authentic being, but it calls for much more mutual engagement between therapist and client than is characteristic of much psychoanalytic work. The core of the methodology centers around aiding the client in coming to appreciate the naturalness, power, scope, and incredible productivity of the process of inward searching.

Inward searching, in very simple terms, is the process we all use when pondering a life issue, trying to come up with a fresh idea, or weighing choice alternatives. But most of us use this inherent capacity with very little awareness and scarcely more development. Truly effective inner searching involves:

1. Drawing on the tremendous power of the human sense of concern by getting deeply in touch with what matters in one's life right at this moment.
2. Getting and keeping as subjectively centered as possible while opening awareness to whatever emerges under the impetus of the feeling of concern.
3. Maintaining an expectancy of inward discovery (in contrast to the tendency of many clients primarily to report to the therapist what is already known about oneself).
4. Recognizing and relinquishing the blocks to full and freely ranging awareness. These blocks arise from faulty and constricting conceptions about oneself and the world (such as, "I'm too awkward to be in charge of other people" or "There's no use really hoping for someone to love me; everybody's just out for what they can get for themselves").
5. Opening the newly freed inner awareness to the kind of inner vision that permits actualization of enlarged being with greater congruence of feeling and action.

The psychotherapist aids this powerful process by maintaining and making evident his belief in the client's capacity to deal with his own life concerns, by calling on the client to use that potential rather than seeking to depend on other resources, by providing support during the inevitable times of despair and anguish, by identifying the resistances to full inner awareness as those resistances are disclosed, by insisting at all times on the client's truly



being involved and present, and by taking the client very seriously.

As client courage, perseverance, and determination join with therapist skill, empathy, and courage, clients find a sense of greater personal power and durability, feelings of meaningfulness and choice, changes in how and with whom they want to live their lives, and some experiences that transcend the ordinary life boundaries. These transpersonal openings may include such subjective phenomena as: discovery of greater depth, richness, and meaningfulness of the stream of subjective awareness: a changed experience of time, causality, or relationship; synesthesia and other alterations in perception; conjunction in subjectivity (e.g., telepathy, markedly increased empathy); recognition of the ultimate unity of all being; discovery of the healing powers of consciousness; and recognition of death as an event, rather than an ending. Walsh (1976) has described in rich detail his own experience in this therapy and some of the products it yielded.

It seems likely that the basic searching process is a tool of the liberated consciousness that can be employed in infinite exploration and with unending discovery and continually renewed emancipation of being.

## **APPLICATIONS**

Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy has had its greatest area of application with that segment of the population possessing more than

average advantages of education, socioeconomic support, and incentives toward self-exploration and self-development. However, reports are becoming more frequent — if still informal — of the extension of the basic concepts and methodology to other population segments with varying but encouraging degrees of success.

To date, this approach has gone on under the general rubric of intensive individual and group psychotherapy. Clients are usually seen several times a week for several years. Now, work is progressing in developing group and other methods for increasing the availability of this approach.