

Existential-Analytical Methods for the Treatment of Anxiety

Coordination: Alfried Längle, Vienna

Description of the symposium

Existential Analysis is a phenomenological and person-centered psychotherapy that promotes living with inner consent, making free, authentic choices, and discovering a responsible way of dealing with oneself and the world in order to live a fulfilled life. Grounded in Viktor Frankl's anthropology which identified meaning-seeking as the deepest human motivation (Frankl, 1988), the theoretical framework of EA articulates three other Fundamental Existential Motivations (FMs): the motivation to be (FM1), to experience the value of life (FM2), and to be oneself (FM3) (Längle, 2005). Given its psychological and philosophical heritage, it is not surprising that Existential Analysis is at times dismissed as a philosophical, and impractical approach in contemporary clinical practice.

However, Viennese Existential Analysis (EA) (Längle, 2012) elaborates a theoretical framework which leads directly to specific psychotherapeutic interventions. The primary aim of this symposium is to elaborate on the existential-analytical understanding of anxiety, and to demonstrate three methods for treating anxiety: confrontation and dereflection, personal positioning, and paradoxical intention. Clinical examples will be integrated throughout this presentation to illustrate the clinical applications of the methods discussed. While the three methods are intentionally and unapologetically directed towards the alleviation of various forms of anxiety, it remains important to remember that they are grounded within and lived out through a person-centred and phenomenological psychotherapy. That is, even within these methods, the final aim for the approach is the calling forth of the person of the client in relation to and dialogue with the person of the therapist.

Paper 1: Confrontation and Dereflection

Mihaela Launeanu, PhD, Existential Analysis of Canada & Trinity Western University, Canada

This paper will discuss confrontation and dereflection as two of the EA methods to deal with anxiety. First, confrontation will be presented as the primary way to deal with anxiety in EA therapeutic approach, and the purpose, the steps, the implementation of steps, as well as the anticipated outcomes of this method will be elaborated. In EA, working therapeutically with anxiety involves helping the client confront reality ('what is') rather than persisting in imagining frightening possibilities ('what if'). Confrontation represents a rigorous therapeutic strategy to accomplish this overarching goal. The method requires a systematic yet dialogical implementation of a sequence of steps. Specifically, during confrontation the client is invited and supported by the therapist to discern: a) where is anxiety experienced, b) how it is felt, c) what is the object of anxiety (i.e. what is the client fearful of), d) what is client's greatest fear (i.e. what would be the worst that could happen), e) how would it be if the greatest fear would happen, and f) how to be able to accept and live with the consequences of the worst case scenario (i.e. let be what may come). This process leads client to endure or accept life the way it is, to a better contact with reality, and to an increased sense of confidence.

Dereflection represents a broader existential attitude to let go of the desire to control everything and let life be. The aim of dereflection is to counteract the fearful hyper-reflection or the excessively anxious focus on obtaining a definite outcome in a certain situation. Derefection can be used therapeutically as a strategy to promote turning client's attention away from performing and striving to achieve a certain

outcome, towards discovering and living the meaning and values embedded in certain situations. The history of the method, its implementation and its clinical applications will be discussed.

Paper 2: Personal Positioning

Derrick Klaassen, PhD, Existential Analysis of Canada & Trinity Western University, Canada

This paper will discuss Personal Positioning (PP) as a phenomenological therapeutic method which aims primarily to activate the person and position the client through outer and inner dialogue. Specifically, PP supports the client to take a three-fold position towards reality, one's own capacity, and the value in the anxiety-provoking situation. PP is implemented dialogically over three steps: 1) positioning towards the outside (e.g., what is really going on and what is the actual threat) in order to determine the actual reasons to be anxious and whether there is any reason for the experienced fear, 2) positioning towards the inside (e.g., towards one's self) in order to detect and check one's power and capacity if one let happen what one fears; and 3) positioning towards the positive or valuable in the feared situation (e.g. what is the value for what one is undergoing that situation). PP is recommended primarily in situations where the client experiences a blockage caused by feelings of powerlessness and passivity or by generalized assumptions or beliefs. PP could also be used also as part of crisis intervention protocols and as a broader framework for therapeutic work that requires defining problematic areas and positioning.

Paper 3: Paradoxical Intention

Janelle Kwee, PhD, Existential Analysis of Canada & Trinity Western University, Canada

Originally introduced by Viktor Frankl, paradoxical intention is a method that advises and encourages the anxious client to wish or intend what she or he fears (e.g., a heart attack or an airplane crash). The method is indicated for all anticipatory anxieties (e.g., phobias, OCD, anxious reactions like public speaking), where there is a gap between cognition and affect. By advising the client to deliberately wish for what he or she fears, this method facilitates a humorous and paradoxical engagement with the feared situation that reduces the anticipatory anxiety and the fearful expectations. Rather than running away from the feared situation one is actively attempting to provoke it, and thus, courage and confidence can develop.