Working with Adolescents' Search for Meaning in Today's World: Existentialism Revisited

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Abstract

It is difficult to find writing on using existentialist approaches in clinical work with adolescents. It is commonly believed that a number of struggles that adolescents experience closely resemble the existential issues of an increase in freedom, choice, responsibility, awareness of isolation and a search for meaning. Counseling practitioners are reminded that existential counseling approaches are a strong match for the adolescent developmental stages. The focus of this paper is on one of the existential issues: search for meaning. The author first provides a working definition of existentialism followed by a discussion on adolescents and their search for meaning. The final section goes over the role of the counselor and specific counseling approaches to use that are based upon Frankl’s (1984) three ways of giving meaning to life.
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It is difficult to find a lot of writing on using the concepts of existentialism when counseling adolescents. In comparison, it is relatively easy to find existentialism concepts applied to adults. Adolescents’ developmental growth and obstacles to that growth appear to be strongly related to the four ultimate concerns that are an inescapable part of human existence in the world. These four concerns are death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980).

It is commonly believed that a number of conflicts that adolescents experience closely resemble the existential issues of an increase in freedom, choice, responsibility, and awareness of isolation. Also, there is a search for meaning which may result in increased anxiety and a sense of personal emptiness (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003; Frankl, 1984; Fry, 1998; Hacker, 1994; Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Bermnan, 2004; Yalom, 1980).

The focus of this paper will be on adolescents’ struggle with a search for meaning and what counselors can do to support this search. Frankl (1984) believed that the will to meaning is the main human motivation. This drive for the will to meaning is on a parallel to the developmental sequence that occurs for a person-moving from childhood’s egotistic emphasis on pleasure, through young adulthood’s interest in power, to full and healthy maturity, where meaning and value are seen to be the real wellsprings of life (Kruger, 2002).

This paper begins with a working definition of existentialism followed by a discussion on meaning and purpose as those concepts relate to adolescents. The final portion of the paper will cover the counselor’s role in therapy when working with adolescents trying to navigate their unique self journeys for meaning and purpose in life.
**Existentialism Defined**

Existentialism is a philosophical position that has divergent thinkers. This philosophy has distinct ontological, moral, epistemological, and spiritual aspects that structure its psychological practices. This has made it difficult to clarify the practical usefulness for counseling.

It is not a theory of personality or an assortment of therapeutic techniques. It is a *view of human nature* (Bugental, 1965). Bugental (1978, 1981, 1987, 1999) has worked for many years to clarify the process and goals of an existentially oriented therapy. By definition, every person has an “existence.” Each person answers the existential question of “how shall I live” by the way he/she constructs life day to day (Bugental, 1981; Chessick, 1996; Taylor, 1991). This self-and-world construct system can be defined as the conception each of us holds about who and what we are and how our world operates (Bugental, 1978). Bugental (1987, 1999) believed that the self-and-world construct system is central to a person’s functioning but can easily go unrecognized as a source of life problems and emotional distress. The self-and-world construct system allows a human life to be possible in a world that, existentially, has no absolute structure or meaning.

The self-and-world construct raises questions that must come from the realm of meaning: What is our purpose in living? What personal meanings does our will manifest in the world? What values flow from our meanings? The answers to these existential questions compose the bedrock of our existence (Frankl, 1984; Yalom, 1980).

**Meaning and Purpose: Focus on Adolescents**

Meaning refers to making sense, coherence, or order out one’s existence and to having a purpose or goal toward which one can strive (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). Meaning for the
adolescent is created by her/his efforts to form intimate relationships, establish a stable identity, and to be creative and productive (Erikson, 1963). Adolescents can also achieve meaning by setting goals and anticipating future possibilities (Reker, et al., 1987).

All people must deal with the question of meaning—or the lack of meaning. Frankl (1984) saw three ways of giving meaning to one’s life: by doing a deed or by creating a work; by encountering someone or experiencing something; and by the attitude taken toward unavoidable suffering. The feeling of meaninglessness can lead to psychopathology and even suicide. Many adolescents lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. These youth experience a deep inner emptiness, and they are caught in what Frankl (1984) called the existential vacuum. No instinct tells adolescents what to do, and no tradition tells them what they ought to do. Sometimes, adolescents do not know even what they wish to do. This existential vacuum manifests itself in a state of boredom. This state underlies depression, aggression and addiction. Suicide, anxiety, depression, substance abuse and delinquent behavior increase during adolescence (Petersen, 1988). Many adolescents are so alienated from family, peers or society that a search for meaning becomes impossible. In the face of meaninglessness and alienation from which it may derive, adolescents have little to expect from life other than emptiness, futility and boredom (Fromm, 1973).

Counselor’s Role in Existential Therapy: Adolescents’ Search for Meaning

The goal of existential therapy is helping clients accept, bear, and live constructively with anxiety. Clients first begin the process of identifying the ways in which they have submissively accepted situations and given up control. May (1958) believed the purpose of therapy is to assist clients in becoming aware of their existence to the degree that they are mindful of their full potential, as well as act on the basis of that awareness. This approach is an invitation to clients to
recognize the ways they are not living authentically and to challenge them to make choices that will lead to becoming what they are capable of being (Fernando, 2007).

The core of existential therapy is the relationship between the counselor and the adolescent client. The client needs to be able to relate to the therapist as a real person. Existential therapy recognizes the relational aspect of life and of therapy, and this helps the client to become aware of her/his experiences, potentialities, and means of interaction with the therapist (Bugental, 1978; May, 1995; Yalom, 1980). Two people come together to explore what it is to be one person in relation to another, in relation to society, and in relation to the material world (Kruger, 2002). It is the relationship between client and counselor that heals.

Once the healing relationship is established and remains the core of the counseling process, the counselor may use confrontation, encouragement, teaching, gestalt exercises, history taking, cognitive homework—literally anything at all that will work for the client’s search for meaning (Yalom, 1985). The counselor needs to keep in mind that “what matters is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment” (Frankl, 1984, p. 113). Now, some specific approaches to counseling adolescents will be given that align with the three ways meaning in life can be discovered.

**By Doing a Deed or By Creating a Work**

Existential theorists suggest individuals who are unable to see their life experience as meaningful are prone to depressive symptoms (Frankl, 1984; Yalom, 1980). Meaning in life is created by the individual through her/his actions (Sartre, 1975). Erickson (1968) stated attaining meaning for adolescents depends upon the extent to which they are productive and creative. Finding meaning in a creative way through a task gives life value and uniqueness. This creative value is often referred to as one’s calling in life (Spillers, 2007). For example, if an adolescent is
a survivor of a disabling disease, the counselor can encourage her/him to help others with the same disease.

Human beings have a need to engage in something that gives their lives purpose (Frankl, 1963). Adolescents need to be helped with achieving *authentic purpose* (*AP*). Authentic Purpose is derived from anything one has a genuine love or interest in (as long as it does not compromise others or self). This approach to purpose seeking can be an effective way to achieve mental health. Anyone who has ever done something they really love can attest to the enduring and deep feelings of happiness and fulfillment this brings. Engaging in an activity because it is enjoyable will likely yield more productivity and success than an unenjoyable activity (Keshen, 2006). The counselor can help the adolescent clients explore why they have not chosen AP activities and then help facilitate clients’ discoveries of AP. One example is a through an experiment in which clients are directed to imagine activities they would ideally accomplish or wish that they would have accomplished, if they discovered they were terminally ill. This exercise allows adolescent clients to examine where passions truly lie and which pursuits are genuinely important (Keshen, 2006).

**By Encountering Someone or Experiencing Something**

Yalom (1980) refers to a fundamental isolation from both creatures and the world that cuts beneath other isolation. No matter how close each of us becomes to another, there remains a final, unbridgeable gap: Each of us enters life alone and must depart from it alone. The *existential conflict* is the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish for protection, contact, and to be part of a larger whole. With adolescents, the feeling of isolation commonly takes the form of alienation, normlessness, a sense of powerlessness,
estrangement or meaningfulness (Young, 1985). Young has concluded that adolescents may represent the most alienated subpopulation in the United States.

It is difficult to know for sure the prevalence of alienation among adolescents. A general sense of its prevalence can be gleaned by looking at the ways in which alienation can be manifested: antisocial behavior, suicide, drug abuse, and early onset of sexual behavior (Hacker, 1994). In addition, one can observe adolescents desperately seeking membership in various clubs, groups, or cults to deal with feelings of isolation.

Counseling can help the adolescents look at their patterns of isolation and explore ways of dealing with those patterns. Inside and outside of therapy, it is the relationship that heals. The connections to others enhances a sense of belonging and gives outside moorings that can prevent clients from feeling consumed by emotional loneliness (Spillers, 2007). The counselor can be the catalyst for helping the adolescent to learn how to form healthy relationships. The counselor must regard the client as feeling, thinking, acting, and being—not an object to be explained. The counselor must show respect for the client as a separate, autonomous human being in the world. The counselor works with what is “already there” in the client’s way of being in the world. The result is useful and practical; emotional distress can be reduced, and the client may be able to discover and choose more adaptive ways of living in the world (Miars, 2002).

The counselor must work within the context that clients have a responsibility for their misery. The counselor must figure out what roles particular clients play in their own predicament, and find ways to communicate those insights to clients. Regardless of the causes for adolescents’ loneliness and emptiness, there can be no motivation to change until they realize that they are responsible for responding to and overcoming misery. Some effective methods
involve looking at clients’ here-and-now in-therapy behavior and showing that clients recreate in the therapy situation the same situation that they face in life (Yalom, 1980).

The counselor can share how the client’s behaviors are perceived by the counselor within the session, and how others in the client’s world might perceive the client in the same way. The counselor is less concerned about how the problem arose and is more concerned with working together with the client to arrive at a solution to the problem (Dzelme & Jones, 2001). The counselor asks the adolescent client if he or she would be willing to try new behaviors both within the sessions and outside the counseling sessions. Taking action in the day-to-day situations is the risk needed to be fully living in relationships and experiences. In human issues, there is hope only in action (Sartre, 1960).

**By the Attitude Taken Toward Unavoidable Suffering**

Human suffering may be seen at every turn, it characterizes each and every life. It is a central theme in the writing and thinking of all existentialists (Walters, 2007). Suffering is known to be one of the most potentially inspiring forces in nature (May, 1984; Frankl, 1984). There are certainly damaging influences in the experience of suffering, for example, forms of meaninglessness and powerlessness associated with poverty or disease (Soelle, 1975). Existentialism argues that suffering possesses another dimension, that of promise and hope (May, 1989). Suffering can help one appreciate life and give it meaning. Suffering serves as a signal for action and choice. “A human being will not change his or personality pattern, when all is said and done, until forced to do so by suffering; advice, persuasion, requests from the outside will effect only a temporary change in the cloak of the personality” (May, 1989, p. 123).

Many adolescents experience traumatic events in their lives. Trauma can result in growth, just as distress and adversity can push someone to develop (Corbett & Milton, 2011).
Research suggests that traumas can precipitate positive development, for example, cancer (Taylor, 1983); HIV infection (Schwartzberg, 1994); bereavement (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989) and disasters (McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997). These crises become a personal turning point, a new life possibility (Jacobsen, 2006).

The counselor supports adolescent clients as whole human beings and provides a safe channel to explore their world and reconnect with themselves (Paulson & Krippner, 2007). The counselor channels the client’s suffering into productive paths rather than alleviate the suffering. The counselor can point out each week the manner in which the sufferings of the client during the previous week were related to faulty behaviors and attitudes (Fernando, 2007). Each time clients lament their life circumstances, the therapist inquires how they created the situation.

The counselor can also help the adolescent client through the use of bibliotherapy that has existential concepts. As an example, Thunnissen (2010) connected the processes in J.K. Rowling’s story of Harry Potter to Yalom’s existentialist/humanistic theories, including meaningless, existential isolation, freedom, and death. The worldwide popularity of the Harry Potter books is thus far unsurpassed. The books create a meaningful story out of events in Harry’s life that are often confusing, unclear and tragic. On his journey, he meets challenges/unavoidable sufferings he must overcome in order to become a responsible man. The counselor can relate Harry’s attitudes towards his unavoidable sufferings to the client’s own story.

**Conclusion**

Very little has been written on how the concepts of existentialism can be used with adolescents. For many adolescents, this stage of their lives is difficult to navigate as they
struggle with existential concerns. Practitioners who work with adolescents are encouraged to revisit what existentialism can offer. Using existentialist approaches in counseling adolescents might be exactly what is needed as they struggle to find their place in the world and find meaning and happiness in their lives.
References


