

Section: Psychotherapeutic work during wartime

EXISTENTIAL ASPECTS OF POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY: ANSWERS TO THE CHALLENGES OF WARTIME



SVITLANA KYRYCHENKO

Master Trainer of PPT (Cherkasy, Ukraine)
Ukrainian Institute of Positive Psychotherapy
Email: kirichenko.sveta2014@gmail.com

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Abstract

The article presents the author's perspective on various levels of psychological assistance that can be provided in crisis situations. The focus is primarily on the highest level of assistance, which is existential therapy. Within the context of existential therapy, the author emphasizes the importance of addressing existential aspects of positive psychotherapy.

Furthermore, the article proposes a new concept of "actual capacities" as a type of existential activity. These actual capacities are selected based on four existential conflicts identified by I. Yalom, and they help individuals to confront these conflicts without resorting to neurotic defenses. In this way, actual capacities serve as existential activities, contributing to healthier responses to the challenges of existence. By developing actual capacities as existential activities, individuals may be better equipped to cope with the givens of existence.

Keywords: positive psychotherapy, existential therapy, actual capacities, crisis situations, existential activities

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began on 24th of February 2022 with a large-scale invasion by the Russian Federation, has affected, to varying degrees, not only every citizen of Ukraine but also the international democratic community. The war as a macro-event and stressor is probably the first in the ranking of traumatic events. Thus, psychological assistance to the general population is becoming very important.

Having stabilized myself emotionally through volunteer work (processing through activities), I began to conduct self-help groups consisting of my colleagues and individual therapy clients. Initially, it was an emotional response to macro- and micro-events related to the war, mutual support and emotional stabilization in the group (processing through contacts). Over time, there was a need to rethink the events, to find personal meanings and one's role in the

situation. Existential questions of life and death, freedom and responsibility, justice, humanity, etc. began to surface. This confirmed my vision of the levels of psychological assistance in crisis situations. First – crisis interventions for emotional stabilization, then – crisis counseling, which requires responding to and rethinking traumatic events, finding their positive functions, and using them for personal growth. And this is a bridge to the third level of psychological assistance – the spiritual level of perception of traumatic events, taking a personal position on them, facing existential data and conflicts (existential psychotherapy).

Methodology

As a positive psychotherapist, I see the great potential of positive and transcultural psychotherapy in existential topics. In this work, I consider the main task to be the integration of the concepts of existential psychotherapy with

the concepts of positive psychotherapy of N. Peseschkian and the latest concepts of his followers in this topic.

The hypothesis of the study is that existential conflicts arising from human confrontation with such existential givens as death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 2008) are universal, permanent, human basic conflicts that are not realized in everyday life due to neurotic defenses. Crisis states can violate these defenses and bring existential conflicts from the subconscious to the surface ("Sleeping Dogs Wake Up"). Now a person has a choice – to strengthen defenses or to face these situations directly. Such a meeting requires a special kind of inner activity – existential activity.

The concept of existential activities was proposed by Y. Kravchenko in his article "My Existential Health: The First Three Letters," which was not published but is cited by S. Fursova-Vine in a historical review of the development of the existential component of positive psychotherapy (Fursova-Vine, 2017). He defines existential activities as healthy ways of reacting to the given of being (existential given) (Kravchenko, 2016). And these are not so much actions and deeds as the ability to live the encounter with existential given in the most adequate way.

In positive psychotherapy, the concept of predetermined fate (what we cannot change) corresponds to existential data (Peseschkian, 2016). When faced with predetermined fate, a person develops certain actual capacities that allow him or her to rise above the situation, realize the existential conflict and withstand its tension while maintaining his or her integrity. Such actual capacities are existential activities, i.e., they are capacities that allow one to withstand the tension of existential conflicts without using neurotic defenses.

Discussion

Let us consider four well-known existential conflicts and try to find relevant capacities that can act as existential activities adequate to these conflicts.

The first conflict in the model pertains to the Life-Death conflict, which refers to an individual's confrontation with the finitude of their existence. This conflict is situated in the realm of the "I" according to the model. The article examines the actual capacities that can

help individuals mitigate this confrontation and make the conflict more bearable. I. Yalom's existential concept underscores the interconnection of life and death, which exist simultaneously and not sequentially. Death has a profound impact on our experience and behavior, continuously penetrating the boundaries of life. (Yalom, 2008).

Life and Death are connected by time. Synonyms and associations of time – instant, moment, eternity, timeliness, transience, simultaneity, duration – are closely related to the concepts of Life and Death. Time unites life and death and allows us to see this conflict in perspective. People who have experienced near-death experiences have a sense of the transience of life and the value of the moment. One of N. Peseschkian's favorite sayings: "We cannot add days to our lives, but we can add life to each of the days."

It is logical to assume that the actual capacity of **time** appears in this conflict as an existential activity.

The next actual capacity that can perform the function of existential activity in the Life-Death conflict is patience, **patience** as the capacity to withstand and accept life and to wait patiently for one's death. "To be able to withstand life", "to be able to be" is the first fundamental existential motivation according to A. Lengle (Lengle, 2001).

One can see the relationship between the formation of self-concept and the attitude to life and death. The actual capacity that forms unconditional self-acceptance (self-worth) are time, patience, and a model. Unconditional acceptance of life and death is also related to **patience** and **time**. A person who has received a sufficient amount of love in the form of quality time and a patient attitude is able to cope more easily with the conflict between Life and Death. According to I. Yalom, the anxiety of death is inversely proportional to the satisfaction with life (Yalom I., 2008). And this provides an important support for psychotherapeutic practice. Helping a client to cope with death anxiety means teaching him or her to enjoy life more.

The next existential conflict we will consider is the Isolation – Intimacy conflict. Existential isolation is the flip side of our uniqueness. The confrontation with death will inevitably lead an individual to experience isolation and loneliness ("We come into this world alone and leave it

alone"). There is no lonelier human experience than the experience of dying. To the extent that a person is responsible for his or her own life, he or she is alone. Responsibility implies authorship, and to realize one's authorship means to give up the belief that there is someone else who creates and protects you." (Yalom, 2008).

Obviously, from the point of view of positive psychotherapy, this existential conflict belongs to the sphere of "You". Like any existential conflict, it is fundamentally insoluble, but it can be mitigated by certain actual capacities, which will be existential activities in relation to it. What actual capacities can fulfill this function?

Erich Fromm believed that isolation is the primary source of anxiety and emphasized the feeling of helplessness that accompanies the fundamental disconnection of the human being (Fromm, 2019).

The fear of existential isolation is the driving force behind interpersonal relationships. The problem of relationships is the problem of fusion-isolation. A person must separate himself from another to experience isolation: a person must be alone to experience loneliness. However, it is precisely the encounter with loneliness that makes it possible for a person to become deeply and consciously involved in another. Martin Buber believed that the desire for relationships is "innate," given from the beginning. A child has an impulse to contact with another being, initially tactile, and then "optimal" (Yalom, 2019).

The positive vision of the human being in positive psychotherapy similarly testifies to the innate capacity for love.

Thus, the existential activities that are the connecting link in the Isolation - Intimacy conflict may be the actual capacities of **contact** and **love**. Love does not cancel our separation, which can be accepted without fear but cannot be eliminated. Love is the best way to deal with the pain of separation. But not all forms of love can mitigate this conflict. Buber, Maslow, and Fromm came up with similar formulations of "self-sufficient love". Fromm distinguished symbiotic fusion from "mature" love (Fromm E., 2018).

And these ideas are very important for a psychotherapist. In order to help a client cope with the fear of loneliness, not at the expense of symbiotic relationships, it is important to develop his or her ability to love from the childish need (to receive love) to adult "mature" love,

capable of giving. And yet, one of the fundamental facts that the client has to discover in therapy is that although contact, love, and encounter with the other can mitigate existential isolation, it cannot cancel it.

To separate oneself from others is also to feel one's autonomy, independence, and ability to choose. And here we encounter the next existential given – Freedom and its concomitant Responsibility. Freedom and Responsibility imply the authorship of one's life and destiny, depriving us of support in the outside world and expectations of transferring responsibility for our lives to others. The realization of the fact of our own construction of ourselves and the world and our own responsibility is seriously frightening. Many existential philosophers have described it as an anxiety of lack of ground, as a "pre-anxiety" - the most fundamental of all, penetrating even deeper than the anxiety of death. We avoid situations that could lead us to realize the fundamental lack of ground. We look for structure, authority, grandiose projects, magic-something bigger than ourselves. E. Fromm in "Escape from Freedom" says that even a tyrant is better than the complete absence of a leader (Fromm, 2005).

The poles of this existential conflict are Freedom and Responsibility on the one hand, and Belonging as an opportunity to be part of something bigger, which allows you to share responsibility, to feel the structure, i.e. the soil, on the other hand. This conflict can be attributed to the sphere of "We", considering "We", according to N. Peseschkian's "circles" from the family to humanity or even to the Universe. This conflict can be mitigated by the actual capacity to **trust**, as the capacity to rely on oneself and the world, to trust others and share responsibility with them, as well as the capacity to **unity (integrity)** of the individual and **unity** with others and the world. In fact, this is the realization of N. Peseschkian's transcultural principle of "unity in diversity." It is important to distinguish such unity from dependence, which can be realized in various defense mechanisms related to the anxiety of freedom and responsibility. Most of these defenses are manifested either in underdeveloped trust and the need for control, or in naive gullibility and dependence on authority. And the goal of therapy will be to harmonize this actual capacity. And only then will it fulfill the function of existential activity. The next existential conflict

we will focus on is the conflict of Meaninglessness - Meaning. Viktor Frankl argued that twenty percent of neuroses are of "noogenic" origin, i.e., they arise from the lack of meaning in life (Frankl, 2006).

The questions of the meaning of life, values, ideals, attitude to something bigger than the person himself, beyond his life, belong to the sphere of "Primal-We". The problem of meaning consists of two irreconcilably opposite truths: a person needs meaning, the absence of meaning, goals, values and ideals in life causes significant suffering; however, the existential concept of freedom states that the only truly absolute fact is the absence of absolutes, there is no "meaning", no great plan of the universe, no guiding life orientations, except those created by the individual. The problem is to find one's individual meaning in a world that has no common meaning.

Much has been written about the realization of individual meaning by V. Frankl. He believed that the path to meaning lies through the realization of values and identified three groups of values - the values of creation, the values of experience, and the values of relation (attitude). C. Rogers (1961) and A. Maslow (1962) saw the source of personal meaning in self-actualization. The idea of self-actualization is also present in positive psychotherapy. At the same time, it also contains the idea of self-improvement as an extension of identity. In the course of an individual life cycle, there is a gradual evolution

of meanings. This confirms Erik Erikson's theory of the life cycle and tasks at different life stages. And here we can refer to V. Karikash's concept of the "Five Peaks of Destiny" and five existential identities (Karikash, 2009), which develops the existential aspects of positive psychotherapy and is in line with these ideas.

H. Peseschkian emphasized two main ways of gaining meaning: gaining general meaning (religion) and searching for individual meaning (science, psychotherapy). However, even the search for individual meaning is not comprehended rationally, but through faith and the pursuit of ideals.

Thus, in this existential conflict, such actual capacities as **faith** and **ideal** come to the fore as existential activities.

Faith as an existential activity is the capacity to enter into a relationship with the unknown and unknowable, the capacity to be open to life and the world and thus to be "touched by life," i.e. to live existentially.

Conclusions

In summary, the Table 1 depicts the four existential conflicts proposed by I. Yalom, along with their correlation with the domains of relationships (i.e., role models) in the PPT framework. Moreover, the relevant capacities that function as existential activities with respect to these conflicts are identified.

Table 1. Existential conflicts and actual capacities (AC) as existential activities

Relationship's sphere	Existential conflict	AC as existential activities	Motivating mottos
I	Life-Death	Time Patience	"We can't add days to our lives, but we can add life to every day."
You	Isolation-Intimacy	Contact Love/ acceptance	"It's a pleasure to be with you, but it's a pleasure to be without you"
We	Freedom and Responsibility - Belonging and sharing of responsibility	Trust Unity	"Unity in Diversity"
Primary-We	Meaninglessness Meaning	Faith Ideal	"According to your faith it will be given to you"

The author's conclusions regarding actual capacities as existential activities are drawn from

their personal psychotherapeutic experience and review of relevant literature. Although the

author acknowledges the potential limitations of their conclusions in terms of reliability and objectivity, they suggest that their findings could serve as a basis for further exploration in the area of actual capacities as existential activities.

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