

Clarifying and Furthering Existential Psychotherapy: An Introduction

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A few years ago, the editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Jim Overholser, approached me about guest editing a special issue on existential psychotherapy. The impetus for the project was the announcement of the first World Congress for Existential Therapy that was to be held in London in May of 2015 (see van Deurzen and Tantam 2016, this volume). It sounded like a great idea. I viewed it as an opportunity to clarify and further existential psychotherapy. As for my background, I consider myself a cognitive-behavioral logotherapist. I was learning extensively about logotherapy, an existential-humanistic perspective, at the same time I was learning extensively about cognitive-behavioral therapy while a graduate student at the University of South Dakota in the mid to late 1990s.

Why logotherapy? Frankl's perspective was my initial, primary contact with existential psychotherapy. I first read *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1959/1985) while an undergraduate student at the University of Houston in 1994. I had the good fortune of being randomly assigned the text as a book report for an undergraduate course in personality theories. I was struck by the elegant, compelling nature of the writing so much so that I looked for ways to integrate it into my graduate studies. Soon after I began to study Rollo May, Irvin Yalom, James Bugental, Kirk Schneider, and many other authors of existential psychotherapy books and articles. As I studied, many questions came to mind. What is existential

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psychotherapy? How does existential psychotherapy relate to existential philosophy? Who practices existential psychotherapy? How does existential psychotherapy fit with cognitive-behavioral therapy and other schools of thought? How many existential psychotherapy schools are there? What are the similarities and differences of the various existential psychotherapy perspectives? How do you take such abstract concepts and put them into practice, or research them? It seemed to me that these were essential questions to answer. While the questions appeared straightforward, the answers were not. Existential psychotherapy books and articles are often difficult to read given their abstract nature and their being suffused with technical jargon (an observation that many graduate students in training have helped to confirm over the years, and an observation also often noted by critics).

Frankl “spoke” to me the most. I was particularly enamored by the idea that you could address adversity, even severe forms of adversity such as terminal illness or large-scale disaster, through your attitudinal stance. His perspective was that meaning could be found under any circumstances. His work emphasized meaning, resilience, and empowerment, and was a precursor to many other therapeutic approaches (Schulenberg et al. 2008). Inspired, I read everything by Frankl that I could find. He was really on to something, and speaking in a language that made sense on both personal and professional levels (although at times here, too, one finds abstract concepts and technical jargon that one must work through). We have since incorporated logotherapy and related existential ideas into our work in the area of disaster mental health, meaning’s significance serving as a prime focus (e.g., Aiena et al. in press; Schulenberg et al. 2014, in press; Weathers et al. in press; see also Park and Folkman 1997; Park 2010, in press). There is a congruence of fit between these literatures.

Existential psychotherapy perspectives, logotherapy being one example, have much to offer. They are just as relevant to problems encountered today as they were to problems described in years past. The purpose of the initial special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* (March 2015, Volume 45, No. 1) on existential psychotherapy was to educate, and more importantly, to clarify, in order to move the literature forward by addressing essential questions about these valuable perspectives. Contributions to the original special issue covered a wide range of contexts, countries, and schools of thought. The works represented an international perspective, with submissions from the United States (Louis Hoffman, Lisa Vallejos, Heatherlyn P. Cleare-Hoffman, and Shawn Rubin; Todd DuBose; Kirk Schneider), the United Kingdom (Emmy van Deurzen; Edgar Correia, Mick Cooper, and Lucia Berdondini), Colombia (Efren Martinez and Ivonne Andrea Florez), the Russian Federation (Dmitry Leontiev), and Portugal (Daniel Sousa). These original articles are reproduced for this book, and two new chapters have also been added. The first selection is a new work by Ernesto Spinelli (United Kingdom) on the nature of change in existential therapy. The second selection is co-authored by Emmy van Deurzen and Digby Tantum (United Kingdom), and focuses on their efforts to develop the World Congress for Existential Therapy. Readers of this book will be able to see themes across the various chapters, such as efforts to clarify what is meant by existential psychotherapy, its utility and congruence of fit with different

theoretical perspectives, and its growing empirical support. Efforts are also made to elucidate abstract concepts, making them easier to grasp, with examples of the application of various techniques in different settings.

The original special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, and this expanded book, represent the combined energies of many individuals. I'd like to acknowledge and express appreciation to the contributors. I'd also like to extend my gratitude to the many individuals who provided helpful feedback to the authors, ensuring the integrity of the peer-review process. These individuals include Ernesto Spinelli, Paul T. P. Wong, Michael Winters, Kirk Schneider, Dmitry Leontiev, Efrén Martínez, Emmy van Deurzen, Louis Hoffman, Todd DuBose, Daniel Sousa, Edgar Correia, Ed Mendelowitz, Ilene Serlin, Jackson Rainer, Susan Reviere, Shawn Rubin, Edwin Hersch, Brent Potter, and Xuefu Wang. The special issue is also indebted to the graduate student team members of the Clinical-Disaster Research Center at The University of Mississippi, who contributed by providing constructive feedback on many of the submissions. These individuals include Bethany Aiena, Stephanie (Stevie) Wood Campbell, Jennifer Marie Ladner Graham, Ivonne Andrea (Andrea) Florez, Matt Tkachuck, and Lauren Weathers. Their perspectives were invaluable, facilitating many meaningful discussions. Finally, I'd like to offer thanks and appreciation to the editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Jim Overholser, for the opportunity to serve as guest editor for the original special issue, as well as for his encouragement throughout the editorial process.

It was through the combined efforts of many individuals that this book came to fruition. A major goal was to yield a work with a high degree of usefulness to graduate students and experienced clinicians alike, regardless of theoretical orientation, and across a range of settings. With this goal in mind, I believe this text represents a measure of success. It is my hope that readers will agree, finding something of value within these pages that resonates both personally and professionally.

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