

### STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXISTENTIAL GROUP

Dimension	Initial Stage	Working Stage	Final Stage
Key developmental tasks and goals	Focus is on how members perceive and experience their world; thus, the approach is experiential and subjective. Main goal is to increase awareness of options to widen everyone's freedom. Initial task of a group is making a commitment to explore personally meaningful and significant issues concerning human struggles. Members decide how they want to use time in the group and what issues to explore.	Members explore a wide range of universal human concerns such as loneliness, the anxiety of recognizing that one is free to make choices and that freedom is always accompanied by responsibility, the meaning of life and death, and so on. Participants consider alternative ways of dealing with issues they are facing. Emphasis is on taking responsibility <i>now</i> for the way one chooses to be. Focus is on self-discovery, which often leads to giving up defenses and living authentically.	Group counseling or therapy is seen as an "invitation to change." Members are challenged to re-create themselves. In the group they have opportunities to evaluate their lives and to choose how they will change. Toward the end of a group, termination is another issue to face, for the ending of a group brings on anxiety. The termination of a group must be dealt with fully. Members are challenged with finding new ways of being.
Role and tasks of group leader	The leader's tasks are to confront members with the issue of dealing with freedom and responsibility and to challenge them to recognize that regardless of the limits there is always some element of choice in life. Leader helps members see the ways in which they are not living fully. Leader makes use of self as a way to create a safe climate for exploration.	Emphasis is on creating a quality relationship, which entails the leader's full presence. Leader's task is to be there as a person for the members; he or she embarks on an unknown journey with the members and is open to where they will go together. Leaders must understand and adopt the members' subjective world. They also engage in self-disclosure and model authentic behavior.	At the final stage of a group the leader challenges members to go into the world and be active. Leader helps members integrate and consolidate what they've learned in the group so that the maximum transfer can occur. Rather than "doing therapy," leader lives it through the openness of ongoing existential encounters with the members. Leader helps members see their contribution to the changes they've made.
Role of group members	Members always have a part in the group process. They look at <i>who</i> and <i>what</i> they are; they clarify their identity and make decisions concerning how they can achieve authenticity. Members decide what they will explore in the group, as well as how they want to change. They define their personal goals.	Members decide what struggles or existential concerns they will share. Typical concerns include changing roles, creating new identities when old identities are no longer meaningful, value conflicts, emptiness, dealing with loneliness, and working on the fear of freedom and responsibility.	To change, members must go out into the world and <i>act</i> . Since members are responsible for their own lives, they decide if and how they want to live differently. If a group is successful, members achieve an authentic identity and become aware of choices that can lead to action.

2. In the existential group basic human themes constitute the content of interactions. Existential crises are seen as a part of living and not something to be remedied. These crises frequently concern the meaning of life, anxiety and guilt, recognition of one's aloneness, the awareness of death and finality, and the fear of choosing and accepting responsibility for one's choices. Because these "crises" aren't necessarily pathological, they can't be externally alleviated; they should be *lived through* and understood in the context of a group.
3. The leader's major tasks are to grasp the subjective world of members and to establish authentic relationships in which they can work on understanding themselves and their choices more fully. The leader's ultimate goal is to enable clients to be free and become responsible for the direction of their own lives. Therefore, group members are largely responsible for what occurs in therapy.
4. Group leaders do not behave in rigid or prescribed ways, for they can't predict the exact direction or content of any group. Leaders are not technical experts who carry out treatment plans with specialized techniques; rather, they establish real relationships with the members of the group.
5. The *presence* of the leader, or the leader's willingness to be there for others and to confront them when appropriate, is a major characteristic of the effective group. Group leaders must be willing to take responsibility for their own thinking, feeling, and judging. They are present as *persons* with the members and become active agents in the group.
6. Existential therapy is best considered as an invitation to members to recognize the ways in which they are not living fully authentic lives and to make choices that will lead them to become what they are capable of being. This approach does not focus on curing sickness or merely providing problem-solving techniques for the complexities of authentic existence.

## Glossary of Key Terms for the Existential Approach

**Authenticity** The process of creating, discovering, or maintaining the core deep within one's being.

**Existential anxiety** The feeling, viewed as a core characteristic of humans, resulting from having to make choices without clear guidelines and with no guarantees about the outcomes.

**Existential guilt** The result of, or the consciousness of, evading the commitment to choosing for ourselves.

**Existential neurosis** Feelings of despair and anxiety that result from inauthentic modes of living, the failure to make choices, and an avoidance of responsibility.

**Existential vacuum** A condition of emptiness and hollowness that results from meaninglessness in life.

**Freedom** An inescapable aspect of the human condition, making each of us the author of our life and, therefore, leaving us responsible for our destiny and accountable for our actions.

**Logotherapy** Developed by Viktor Frankl, a brand of existential therapy that literally means "healing through reason"; focuses on challenging members to search for the meaning in life.

*(Glossary continues on page 106)*

Techniques	<p>There are no prescribed techniques, and therapeutic procedures can be borrowed from many approaches. More than a group leader's technique or skill, the leader's <i>attitude</i> and <i>behavior</i> are crucial for the group's results. Group leaders are not viewed as technical experts who apply therapeutic treatment plans. There is no assessment, nor is there a predetermined treatment plan for the group to follow.</p>	<p>Emphasis is not so much on doing therapy by using techniques but rather is on being fully present. Thus, leaders may work with dreams; they may work with the current interaction in the group; they may explore the past with members; and they may be both supportive and challenging. Emphasis is on constructive confrontation so that members can learn how to confront themselves.</p>	<p>Since group counseling or therapy is seen as a spontaneous encounter between members (and between members and the leader), the leader is free to draw on a diverse range of techniques from many other therapies. Although the focus is on the <i>encounter</i> that occurs in the group, specific techniques can be developed to challenge members to recognize the choices they have and their decisions to make a new life.</p>
Questions to consider	<p>An existential group can be described as people making a commitment to begin and to continue a lifelong journey of self-exploration. Ask yourself the degree to which you are willing to embark on this journey. Are you willing to do in your own life what you ask your members to do?</p> <p>Are you able to experience the suffering and despair that is sometimes necessary?</p> <p>Are you able to tolerate the unknown yet still take action? Can you exercise your freedom without guarantees?</p> <p>How do you deal with anxiety in your own life? Do you face it, or do you try to avoid it? How might this affect the way you lead a group?</p>	<p>To what degree are you able to be present for those in your group? Are you willing to travel down whatever path a member might lead you?</p> <p>Can you adopt members' subjective views of the world?</p> <p>Do you model in the group those attitudes and behaviors you hope the members will develop? What do you model?</p> <p>Are you able to borrow techniques from other approaches and apply them to the struggles of members? Do you use techniques within the context of the relationship that you have established with members and in the climate of trust?</p> <p>Are you aware of ways that your techniques may or may not fit for a member's cultural background?</p>	<p>Are the members willing to take action? Are they able to act on what they have learned? Are they committed to making changes in their lives? How will they make certain changes?</p> <p>Are the members able to see that they do have choices? that there is a price to pay for acting on their choices? that they must choose for themselves in the face of uncertainty? Are they moving in the direction of trusting their decisions and relying less on others to decide for them?</p> <p>Are members more aware of the options for action available to them?</p> <p>Are members now better able to cope with the anxiety that comes with freedom than when they entered the group?</p>

Reactions: Summarize your reactions to the existential perspective on group developmental stages. What do you like *most*? *least*? What aspects of this approach would you incorporate in your style of leadership?

**Phenomenology** A method of exploration that uses subjective human experiencing as its focus.

**Restricted existence** The state of functioning with a limited degree of awareness of oneself and being vague about the nature of one's problems.

**Self-awareness** The capacity for consciousness that enables us to make choices.

## Exercises and Activities for the Existential Approach

### Rationale

The existential approach does not provide a ready-made set of techniques for group practitioners. It is more an orientation to group counseling than a system of therapeutic procedures. Practitioners can adhere to the existential perspective and at the same time use many other therapeutic techniques.

Here are examples of activities that are in some way related to existential themes. Use these exercises both on your own and in your group or class, and then you'll have a better idea of how to integrate existential concepts in your leadership style. Think about what you can learn about both yourself and group processes through these exercises.

### Exercises

1. *Self-awareness.* Group members often say that they are afraid of learning too much about themselves. They may accept the notion that "ignorance is bliss" or that "what you don't know won't hurt you." What is your position? Are you clearly open to learning all that you can about yourself? Or do you have reservations about expanding your self-awareness? What concerns might you have about opening doors to your life that are now closed? What are some examples that illustrate your own struggles with becoming more self-aware? How do you see your willingness or unwillingness to increase your awareness as related to your potential effectiveness as a group leader? Discuss these questions in your class or group.
2. *Freedom and responsibility.* Freedom of choice entails accepting the responsibility for influencing the direction of your life. Being free means that as long as you are alive you are making choices about who it is you are becoming. Do you believe you are what you are now largely as a result of your choices, or do you think that you are the product of circumstances? What are some *major choices* you've made that have been crucial to your present development? Discuss some of these crucial decisions in your group. How do you imagine your life would be different now if you had decided differently? What struggles have you had between desiring freedom and fearing it? To what degree do you see yourself as being ready to accept the responsibility that accompanies your freedom? Think of specific ways in which the answers to these questions have an effect on the way you lead groups. Discuss how your concerns about your choices might affect your group leading.
3. *Anxiety.* Anxiety is not only an impetus to change but also a result of recognizing that you are responsible for your choices. What kind of anxiety have you experienced in making key life decisions? Do you agree with the existential notion that anxiety produces growth? In what situations do you experience the most anxiety? Do you tend to manage your anxiety by directly facing the consequences of your choices? by attempting to make others responsible for you? by avoiding making choices? by attempting to deny reality? In your group or