

THE CONDITION OF THE ELDERLY THROUGH THE LENS OF EXISTENTIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Aging presents a series of complex challenges, that are not only physical and emotional, but also existential in nature. However, this stage of life can represent a significant opportunity for personal growth, reflection on one's existence and the development of inner resilience. This study aims to explore how the fulfillment of existential needs can contribute to the psychological well-being of elderly individuals, going beyond a merely caregiving approach and promoting an active and participatory vision of aging.

For this purpose, a new intervention method called Social Existential Therapy (SET) was designed and implemented. It is a multidimensional therapeutic approach that integrates various psychoeducational and relational techniques. SET combines:

- A structured reminiscence, aiming at enhancing personal identity through the recall and sharing of meaningful experiences;
- Mindfulness, to promote awareness and acceptance of the present moment, improving emotional regulation;
- Autogenic training, a psycho-physiological relaxation technique designed to reduce stress and anxiety;
- Autobiographical storytelling workshops, intended to provide a symbolic and creative space in which individuals can reprocess their life experiences and strengthen their sense of existential coherence.

The project involved a group of elderly individuals in residential and/or day-care settings and assessed the effectiveness of the SET protocol through pre- and post-intervention measurements on three main variables: (1) emotional well-being, (2) perceived social support, and (3) life satisfaction. The results suggest that an intervention targeting existential needs can not only improve quality of life in later years but also provide concrete tools to face the changes associated with aging with greater serenity.

Theoretical Background and Scope

The latter stages of life are often followed by a series of profound transformations that affect not only the physical domain but also the psychological and social spheres. The decline in physical abilities, the onset of chronic illnesses, the loss of loved ones, and the gradual withdrawal from active social roles can foster feelings of loneliness, uselessness, loss of control, and existential disorientation. These changes can negatively impact one's sense of self, perceived autonomy, and overall quality of life. In this context, the existential needs of the individual take on particular importance—needs that are often overlooked in traditional clinical approaches focused solely on physical health or psychological distress management. This study belongs to a humanistic-existential theoretical framework, inspired by Viktor E. Frankl, founder of logotherapy. According to Frankl, it is possible to find meanings and personal fulfillment through individual responsibility, awareness of self-potential, and the ability to attribute meaning to the human experience even under the most difficult life circumstances. Applying this perspective to the studies on aging means recognizing that old age is not merely a phase of loss but can also be a privileged moment for reprocessing one's life experience, reconstructing personal identity through narrative, and affirming self-authenticity. Addressing existential needs allows elderly individuals not to identify solely with their vulnerabilities, but to rediscover values, relationships, and goals that restore meaning to everyday life.

In specific, meeting these needs involves working on three key dimensions:

1. **Meaning making:** the ability to give coherence and value to one's life experience, even in its most challenging phases.
2. **Personal responsibility:** the active attitude with which an individual approaches circumstances, choosing how to face them and what to prioritize.
3. **Awareness:** understood as mental presence, critical reflection, and authentic connection with oneself and with others.

Promoting these dimensions in elderly individuals contributes to the development of deep emotional resilience—not merely as a reaction to stressful events, but as an existential resource that enables individuals to face the present with dignity and to look toward the future with hope and confidence despite uncertainties.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of Social Existential Therapy (SET), a multidimensional psychological intervention designed to address the existential needs

of elderly individuals, promoting an overall improvement in their well-being. Specifically, the research focuses on two main objectives:

- **To evaluate the effectiveness of SET in promoting the overall well-being of elderly individuals.**

The main goal is to understand to which extent the intervention can positively impact various aspects of psychological well-being, such as the emotional regulation, the reduction of loneliness, the strengthening of self-esteem, and the perception of a meaningful existence, even in the presence of physical and social frailties. The intervention aims not only to alleviate distress but also to actively promote the individual's psychological flourishing through the recovery of a sense of continuity in one's life story, the reconnection with oneself and others, and the enhancement of one's remaining resources.

- **To compare the psychological, emotional, and social outcomes between the participants undergoing the SET intervention and those receiving standard care.**

An additional objective of the study is to contrast two different approaches to elderly care: on one hand, the SET intervention, based on an integrated model that includes structured reminiscence activities, mindfulness, autogenic training, and autobiographical storytelling; on the other hand, traditional care typically provided in residential or day-care settings, which often focus on practical, assistive, or pharmacological aspects, but pay less attention to the subjective and existential dimensions of the individual.

The comparison between these two groups allows for a systematic assessment of whether the SET approach leads to superior outcomes in the following areas:

- **Psychological well-being** (reduction of anxiety, depression, and feelings of emptiness);
- **Emotional balance** (greater ability to regulate emotions and adapt to critical life events);
- **Social integration** (perceived relational support, quality of interpersonal relationships, and sense of belonging to the community)

Through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the project aims to provide empirical evidence on the usefulness of a person-centered approach that addresses individuals' needs for meaning, autonomy, and recognition, thereby contributing to the development of best practices in psychological and psychosocial care for the elderly population.

Methods

The study followed a controlled experimental design to assess the effectiveness of Social Existential Therapy (SET) by comparing an experimental group with a control group. The

methodology was carefully structured to ensure scientific rigor, validity of the results, and clinical relevance.

Study Population

The sample consisted of 50 elderly individuals, aged between 70 and 89 years, selected from residential or semi-residential settings (nursing homes, day centers, or services for the elderly). The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Absence of severe cognitive impairments (e.g., advanced dementia);
- Willingness to actively participate in the proposed program;
- General clinical stability.

The participants were randomly divided into two equivalent groups:

- **Experimental Group (25):** This group followed the full program of Social Existential Therapy (SET). The intervention, structured in several modules, included guided reminiscence activities, mindfulness exercises, autogenic training, and narrative workshops with the aim of stimulating reflections on the meaning of one's life, strengthening personal identity, and promoting the processing of emotional experiences.
- **Control Group (25):** This group received the standard care typically provided in the involved facilities, consisting of general recreational activities, basic assistance, occasional unstructured psychological support, and pharmacological treatments, when necessary, but without systematic existential or psychotherapeutic components.

Measurement Tools

Widely recognized tools in the field of psychogeriatrics were used to measure the effects of the intervention:

- **SF-36 (Short Form Health Survey):** Assesses perceived quality of life in relation to health, examining physical, emotional, and social dimensions.
- **GDS (Geriatric Depression Scale):** A specific tool for detecting depressive symptoms in the elderly, including mild or masked symptoms.
- **WHO-5 (Well-Being Index):** Measures subjective psychological well-being, with particular focus on mood and perceived vitality.

- **Social Support Questionnaire:** Assesses the quantity and quality of perceived social support, considering both the size of the relational network and satisfaction with the support received.
- **SWLS (Satisfaction with Life Scale):** Measures the general level of satisfaction with one's life, capturing the perception of coherence between personal aspirations and lived reality.

Assessment Timeline

Data were collected in three distinct time points to allow for an analysis of short- and medium-term effectiveness:

- **T0 - Pre-intervention:** Initial assessment, administered to both groups before the start of the activities, aiming to establish a common baseline.
- **T1 - Post-intervention:** Second assessment, conducted at the end of the SET program (or, for the control group, after the same period), aiming to detect immediate changes.
- **T2 - 6-Month Follow-up:** Third and final assessment, aiming to measure the long-term maintenance of the benefits achieved, with particular attention to the sustainability of psychological well-being and social support networks.

Social Existential Therapy (SET): Key Features

The **Social Existential Therapy (SET)** is a multidimensional intervention based on the principles of existential therapy, enriched with practical tools designed to address the psychological, social, and daily needs of the elderly population in an integrated way. Its main goal is **to promote active and meaningful aging**, addressing both the internal aspects related to the construction of meaning and identity, as well as the external aspects concerning quality of life and social support. The model proposes a **holistic view of aging**, to consider the individual in its entirety: mind, body, emotions, and relationships.

1. Self-Reflection and Existential Awareness

In this section, the participants are invited to explore the meaning of their existence through guided discussions, moments of introspection, and group activities. Reflection is focused on life's journey, personal values, social roles, and significant moments (both positive and critical). **Present time awareness** is also encouraged, through attention to daily gestures, real needs, and habits. Even the simplest actions (such as preparing tea, taking care of a

plant, or writing a letter) become opportunities to make the day meaningful, strengthening the perception of still having purpose and objective.

2. Structured Reminiscence and Autobiographical Storytelling

Narrating one's life story, presented in a structured form, is a central tool of SET. In individual and group sessions, participants reconstruct their experiences through storytelling, with the support of trained facilitators. This activity serves several therapeutic functions:

- It strengthens personal identity and the continuity of the self;
- It encourages the recognition and appreciation of accumulated experience;
- It stimulates intergenerational connections, as stories can be shared with family members and volunteers;
- It promotes a sense of dignity and contributes to the construction of a symbolic and emotional legacy.

3. Mindfulness and Autogenic Training

This section focuses on emotional regulation and stress management. Mindfulness practices (awareness of the present time) and autogenic training, a technique for psychophysiological relaxation, are introduced. These steps aim to:

- Improve the ability to cope with anxiety, loneliness, chronic pain, or sleep disorders;
- Increase attention levels and mind-body connection;
- Promote a state of inner calm and overall well-being.

4. Project Planning and Future Orientation

Unlike common belief, old age does not exclude the possibility of planning. SET encourages elderly individuals to define short- and medium-term personal goals, even simple but meaningful ones: taking a trip, learning a new activity, reconnecting with a family member, writing their memoirs, etc. This planning contributes to:

- Strengthening personal motivation;

- Counteracting passivity;
- Nurturing a vision of the future in which the individuals remain active protagonists of their own life.

5. Daily Life Support and Health and Social Services Orientation

SET also includes personalized practical support interventions to promote autonomy and reduce the sense of disorientation often experienced in managing daily life or care pathways. Among the activities offered there are:

- Assistance in accessing healthcare services (e.g., physiotherapy, medical visits, therapies);
- Bureaucratic and social guidance, such as obtaining financial benefits, completing forms, or accessing contributions;
- Promotion of participation in recreational and cultural activities, to stimulate curiosity, socialization, and psychosocial well-being.

6. Community Integration and Support Networks

One of the main objectives of SET is to reduce the social isolation by strengthening or fostering the creation of meaningful relational networks. The program works to establish concrete connections between elderly individuals and:

- Local services (e.g., senior centers, libraries, community universities);
- Volunteers and relational facilitators;
- Mutual aid groups and civic participation initiatives.

All of this contributes to generating a sense of belonging, a feeling of social usefulness, and greater trust in the community.

Results

The Social Existential Therapy (SET) intervention produced significant improvements in psychological and social aspects in the participants of the experimental group, compared to the control group, which received only standard care. In particular, the stats analysis highlighted the following:

- **Improved life quality perception:** the scores obtained on the SF-36 questionnaire, which measures health-related quality of life across various

domains (physical functioning, emotional well-being, vitality, social functioning, etc.), significantly increased in the SET group. This indicates that participants perceived themselves as being in better physical, psychological, and relational conditions.

- **Increased of subjective well-being:** the scores on the WHO-5 Well-Being Index, which assesses general psychological well-being (e.g., feelings of energy, mood, interest in life), also showed a remarked improvement, suggesting greater vitality and emotional satisfaction.
- **Increased social support perception:** through the Social Support Questionnaire, participants in the experimental group reported a greater perceived availability of help and understanding from others, both within the family and the community. This finding is particularly relevant because social isolation is one of the most common issues in later life.
- **Reduction of depressive symptoms:** the scores on the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) significantly decreased, indicating a reduction in depressive symptoms among those who participated in the intervention. This suggests that the SET program was effective in addressing feelings of sadness, worthlessness, hopelessness, or apathy, which are often present in old age.

Statistical comparisons between the two groups (SET vs. control) showed remarkable differences with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, highlighted by a large degree of reliability in the results obtained: it is extremely unlikely that such effects are due to chance.

Main Conclusions

The Social Existential Therapy (SET) proves to be a promising and effective intervention for promoting overall well-being in elderly individuals, addressing multiple dimensions of their life experience. The study's results suggest that SET can play a key role in strengthening personal autonomy, supporting emotional resilience, and fostering full existential fulfillment, even in the presence of physical vulnerabilities, social changes, and psychological challenges typical of old age. The effectiveness of SET lies in its ability to combine practical tools for daily support with profound reflection on the meaning of life, inspired by the existential-humanistic model, and particularly by the thoughts of Viktor Frankl. This integrated approach allows elderly individuals to rediscover a sense of continuity and coherence in their personal history, valuing past experiences, remaining abilities, and future desires. Furthermore, SET is not limited to intrapsychic work but also operates on the relational and community levels, combating social isolation and promoting a sense of belonging through the strengthening of support networks and integration into local contexts. The construction or recovery of planning (even small ones) allows the elderly to feel like an active part of their own life and the community. In light of the positive results obtained, it is hoped that the SET model can be adopted on a larger scale and

tested in different contexts - for example, in residential facilities, home care, or day center - considering cultural, social, and territorial differences. Finally, to ensure its effectiveness it will also be important to adapt the intervention to the specific characteristics of the populations involved, even in situations of multiple frailties or limited access to services.

