

First Name

Andreas

Last Name

Ioannou

Email

andreas.i@icloud.com

Affiliation

INSTITUTION (e.g. University, Hospital, Organization)

Affiliation Name

NSPC

Affiliation Country

United Kingdom

Main Themes

Existential therapy's unmet needs

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Title

Trauma and Existential Shattering: A phenomenological exploration of the impact of health trauma on a person's lifeworld

Abstract for

Poster

Abstract

The aim of my qualitative study is to investigate how existential shattering from health trauma impacts a person's lifeworld. I define health trauma as the experience of a life-threatening diagnosis (such as cancer or autoimmune condition) and life after the diagnosis. The study will involve individuals from generation X (born in the 1960s/70s) who have since their diagnosis re-engaged with life's everydayness.

In spite of re-engaging with life's commitments, the traumatic experience was marked with 'existential shattering' – defined as the felt assault on one's personal sense of worth and right 'to be' which includes a profound collapse of familiar meaning structures. I will use interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and semi-structured in-depth interviews involving 9 individuals to examine how they make sense of this intense human experience.

My study's analysis will rely on the synergy of two methods: Smith's 7-step analysis which includes the clustering of experiential statements whilst overlaying a component from Deurzen's Structural Existential Analysis (SEA), the four dimensions of existence, to identify how the participants relate to self, to society, their physical, and spiritual worlds.

My own lived experience of a life-threatening diagnosis and (relative) subsequent recovery have been a catalyst for this project. I discovered (the hard way) that health trauma can affect anyone, anytime. Statistical projections suggest that 9.1 million people in England alone will be living with a life-threatening illness (such as cancer or diabetes) by the year 2040 – this is 1 in 5 of the adult population. Paradoxically life expectancy will also rise, which includes those affected highlighting an increasing need for practical and meaningful support.

My literature review to date, revealed that most research appears to equate trauma to PTSD thus examining the symptomatology of the experience and sidelining existential shattering. The purpose of my research is to call attention to the significance of the existential dimension of health trauma. I am hoping to deliver value at both theoretical and practical levels: devise a conceptual tool to encourage clinicians to address trauma's existential dimension but also invite bodies such as the NHS or the World Health Organisation to devote focus on how people process health trauma – critical to an individual's well-being.

User ID

Andreas Ioannou