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How to Teach Existential Therapy

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My Own Story

My story as an existential therapist begins when, at the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the University of Buenos Aires, where the psychology program was then offered, I took a course called Comprehensive Psychology. One of my professors was Pablo Rispo, of Italian origin who had emigrated to Argentina with his family after the war.

After completing and passing the Comprehensive Psychology course, the students most enthusiastic about existentialism were invited to join the class, and Pablo Rispo invited us to be interns in the Medical Psychology Department of a hospital in Greater Buenos Aires.

Pablo and I began to design a method of providing therapy. By then, we were already a couple and continued our life together until his death.

We believed that existential concepts should be present in the way we delivered therapy.

Student Testimony

To comment on what students of the existential training we offer expressed, I am sharing a survey I conducted last year during one of our training courses. From this longer survey, I selected only two questions and the answers to three of them.

First question: What did the course provide for your training as an existential therapist?

Student 1: It gave me the feeling of not being alone, of being able to find a place to share my human perspective beyond the therapeutic.

Student 2: It provided me with: new learning experiences, new ways of listening, breaking stereotypes, new readings, and in-depth authors. Motivation to research existential therapy and philosophy. A desire to apply it in my practice and in my daily life. I am drawn to and drawn to the blend of philosophy and therapy.

Student 3. This training provided me with a tremendous amount of insight: first, it broadened and enriched my perspective on being, and allowed me to adopt a more phenomenological listening approach with which I can approach encounters with others in a therapy context from a more human perspective... to understand that it's not necessary to try to be a robot, isolating my feelings and emotions to be a good therapist, but quite the opposite. Authenticity is what brings us closer and what enables encounters.

Second question: What did it provide for your life and your profession?

Student 1. Professionally, it provided a foundation for my practice and more tools to use in my interventions. In my life, it has impacted me on the openness I can have with others and on my honest encounters with them, sensitizing and humanizing the therapeutic relationship and recognizing the affection at play within it.

Student 2. Professionally, I need to feel existence and listen to it. For my life: in reality, my life is the same as my professional life. Not feeling isolated, understanding the meaning of ethics as something that isn't neutral, serving without dogmatism, humanizing the bond, and loosening the knot in the tie.

Student 3. In my profession: what impacted me most was having come to understand that the people who come to me for help are beings with a history, with a life, perhaps going through difficulties that cause them suffering, not the sum of a few symptoms or an equation to solve. In life: I feel that after undergoing this training, my relationships acquired another value for me. Today I care for them, not only because they are people I love and care about, but because I am who I am with others, so I have found my ultimate meaning in the encounter with them.

I was truly grateful for everything contributed by the teaching team, always very attentive and willing to teach us and answer questions. I felt very supported throughout the course! I certainly hope that life allows us to continue meeting, joining forces to further grow the existential school in Argentina.

My Own Proposal

Regarding how to approach the training of existential therapists, I have observed that there are two types of training:

- Teaching existential therapy and
- Training future existential therapists.

Teaching existential therapy is quite simple. We use the wide range of existing bibliographies from philosophers, psychiatrists, and existential psychologists, and according to our own tastes, we choose the authors we feel are most representative to put together a program.

But teaching how to be an existential therapist is very complex. It's not about studying new or not-so-new concepts, but about living existentially. And this cannot be taught. Students can be encouraged to embrace their own existence with authenticity, to dare to face the vicissitudes of existence and those of their own existence, to accept the challenge of their choices and take responsibility for them. Before explaining how to teach, I share with students how I conceive therapy, and for this I make a distinction between what I call closed-door therapy and open-door therapy. Of course, this is a metaphor because, doors, to protect privacy, are always closed.

Closed Doors	Open Doors
Accentuates individualism	Both are protagonists
Absorption in theory	Open to uncertainty
Technique as a method to follow, provides security to the therapist	Technique as a disposition toward novelty
Favors repetition	Fosters creativity
Accentuates speech	Accentuates action as a way of expressing oneself in the world (work)
<i>Mitwelt</i> as I-Thou in R. T.	All aspects of worldliness are present
Works on conflict or illness. He works for himself	Promotes resilience and cooperation Works with and for the being

Our courses can be in-person or online, each with different characteristics. We also offer various programs, whether privately offered through the CAPAC Foundation, ALPE Argentina, or universities, both in Argentina and other Latin American countries.

In addition to theoretical training, we believe it is very important for therapists to learn through practical and experiential learning.

Teaching Methods

Role-playing

I use this method between a therapist who teaches and a therapist who learns, or between two therapists who teach, or between two therapists who learn, taking on the roles of therapist and patient.

This is still role-playing, but it is never what happens in a real therapeutic encounter.

"Live and Direct"

We use it in group therapy.

The students, who are all therapists, attend therapeutic groups as students, not just as observers. They can participate with interventions and establish dialogues between themselves and the patients. The therapeutic groups are notified in advance that the students will be participating, which they accept very satisfactorily. The students are not interpreted by their interventions, and if they are not appropriate, the therapists are there to clarify any situations that may arise. After the therapeutic session, the therapeutic team meets with the students to analyze what happened. The students then report on everything they observed; this contributes to promoting phenomenological learning. This approach has given us excellent results. I don't deny that it could be risky, but existence is risk. However, in this case, it was a risk "supervised" by both the patients and the students by the therapeutic team. Another way we implement group therapy teaching is to set up

therapy sessions with students where each student assumes the role of a patient, explains the characteristics of the patient they will be teaching to the group, and other students assume the role of therapist. The teaching therapist can assume the role of a patient or another therapist or intervene from either role depending on the dynamic being established, which is explained before beginning.

Existence (Case) Analysis

In our courses, we work with case analysis, that is, existence analysis. We present our own analyses, and then the students do the same. Another way to learn is through therapist supervision with an experienced therapist, or group supervision where everyone can participate. One of the tasks we work with students in our courses is to choose among the students who will supervise each other, if possible, from different nationalities. For example, A is supervised by B, but B is supervised by C. This allows for an open dynamic of perspectives, with B learning from A and C, and so on with everyone. We don't do face-to-face observation of personal therapy because it's an intrusion into privacy, and the presence of a third party completely changes the communication dynamic.

Doing existential therapy

Another alternative for students is to do existential therapy with an expert.

In conclusion

What I think is important to emphasize is that those who want to be existential therapists question their own being, and that they strive to be free and responsible, available to others who need care. By care, I mean fostering the development of the patient's hidden or unknown potential.