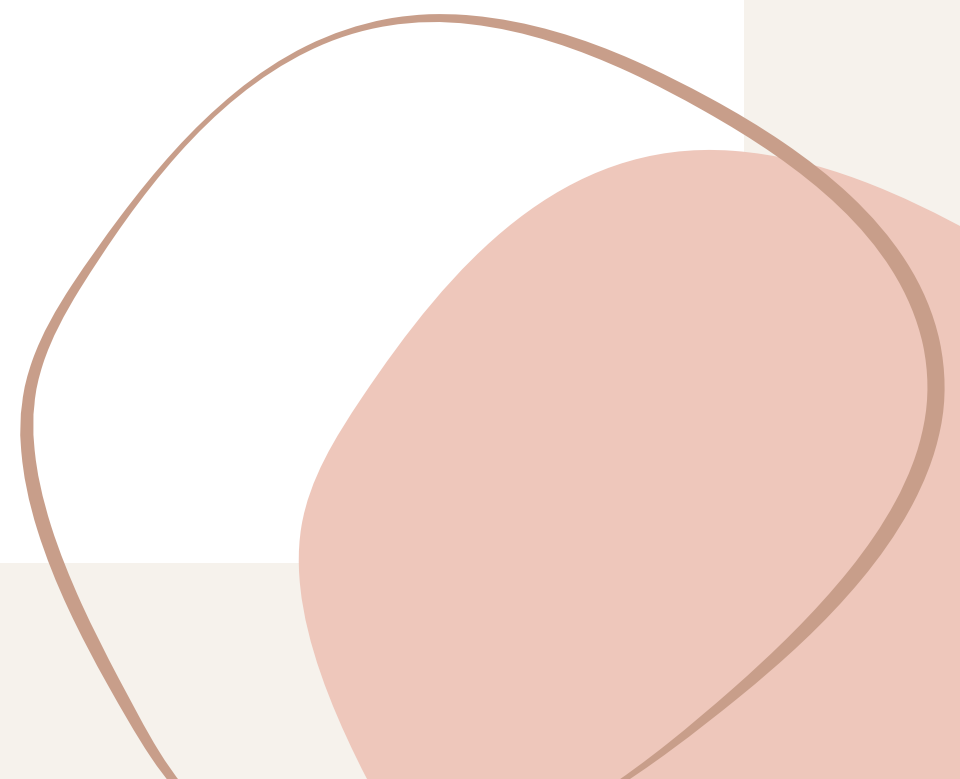


Good morning! While we wait, here's a question:

What if the world we live in is a lie? How would you react?

(Go ahead and type out the answer in words or even in emojis)





What is existential therapy?

- more a **way of thinking**, or **an attitude** about psychotherapy, than a particular style of practicing psychotherapy
- “an **attitude** toward **human suffering** [that] has **no manual**. It asks deep questions about the nature of the human being and the nature of **anxiety, despair, grief, loneliness, isolation, and anomie**. It also deals centrally with the questions of **meaning, creativity, and love**”
- **rejects** the **deterministic** view of human nature
- Existential therapy is grounded on the assumption that we are free and therefore responsible for our choices and actions.



History of existential therapy



- In the **1950s**, **Rollo May** introduced **existential psychology** with an overview in his book *Existential Psychology* (1969).
- Existential thought dates back to ancient philosophers such as **Aristotle**, **Socrates**, and **Asian thinkers** who discussed personal meaning.
- Existential philosophy arose in two waves: first in the late 19th century with **Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Husserl**, and second in the 1940s–1950s in Europe.
- **World War I and II**, along with industrialization and urbanization, contributed to feelings of alienation, leading to the rise of existentialism.

History of existential therapy

- Existential psychology gained momentum in the U.S. through figures like **Carl Rogers**, integrating humanistic values such as self-actualization and freedom into therapy.
- Existential psychology, though less popular post-1960s due to the rise of structured therapies, saw renewed interest with the works of **Yalom, Bugental, and others**.
- Recently, existential perspectives have integrated Eastern spiritual traditions, influencing **contemporary existential counseling and psychotherapy**.

Behind the scenes crew

- **Viktor Frankl**
- **Rollo May**
- **Irving Yalom**
- **James Bugental**
- **Clemmont Vontress**

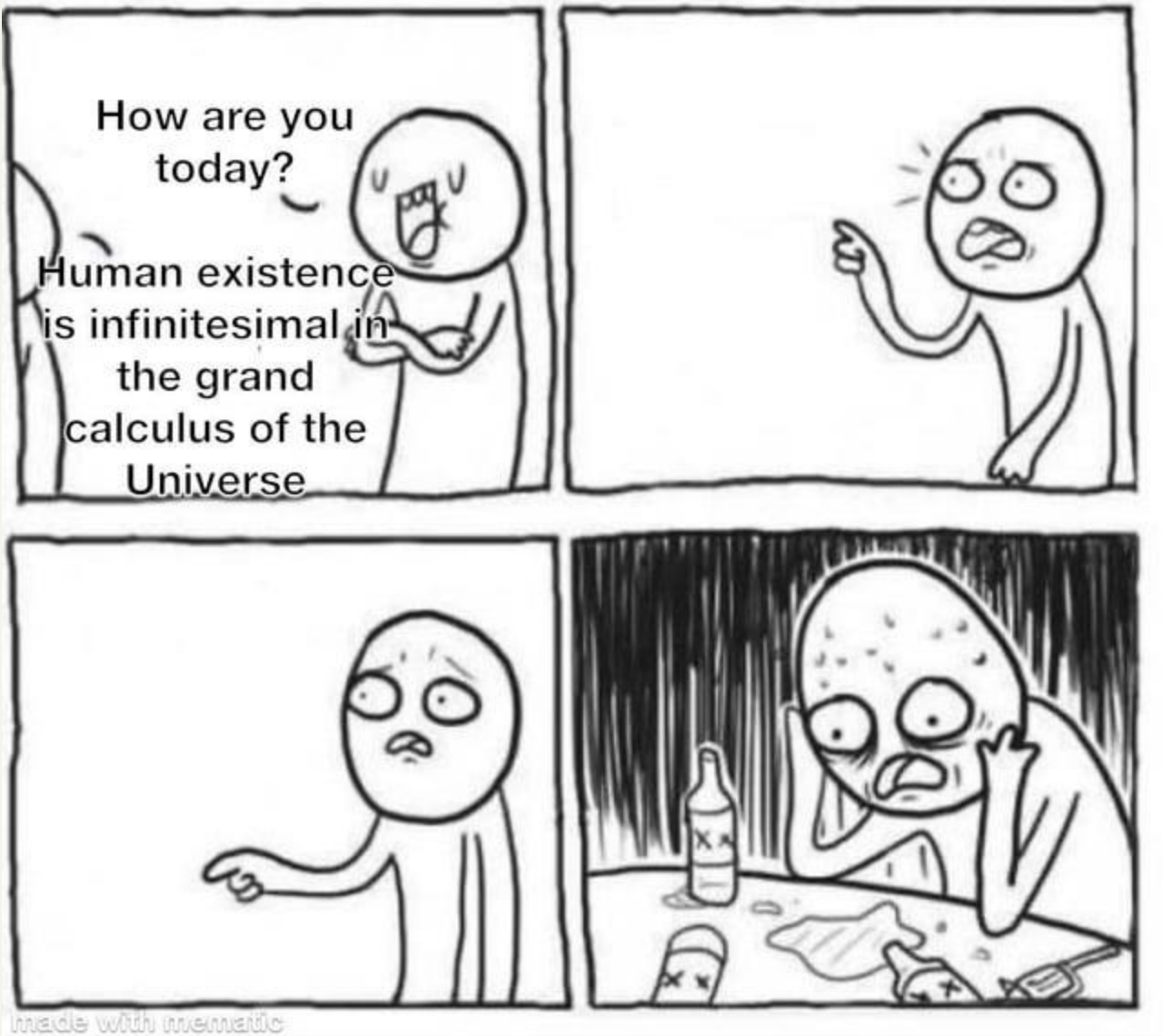


View of human nature



- The current focus of the existential approach is on the individual's experience of being in the world **alone** and facing the **anxiety** of this **isolation**.
- The **significance** of our existence is never fixed once and for all; rather, we **continually** recreate ourselves through our **projects**
- Being a person implies that we are discovering and making sense of our existence
- We pose the same questions philosophers have pondered throughout Western history: "Who am I?" "What can I know?" "What ought I to do?" "What can I hope for?" "Where am I going?"

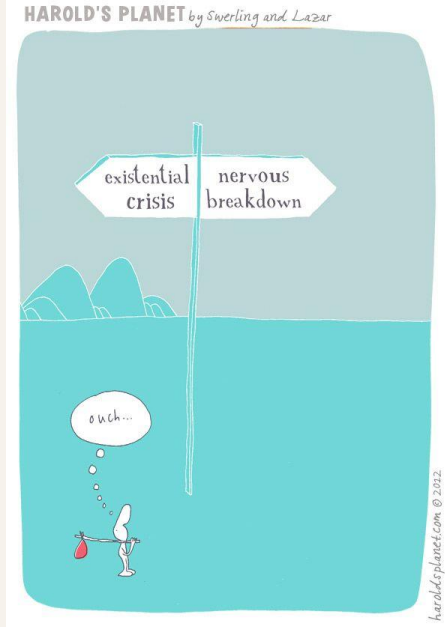
Ultimate concerns of the human condition



Ultimate concerns of the human condition

- Life has **no inherent meaning** and is replete with challenges. Unless people meet these challenges with **awareness, openness, and courage**, their emotional development can become blocked or delayed
- 4 ultimate concerns:
 - 1. Inevitability of death** - The fear of our ultimate nonbeing can cast a pall over people's lives and make them seem pointless
 - 2. Isolation** – we are ultimately alone. Loneliness can be most acute when we are with others and are aware of our lack of a true connection with them.
 - 3. Meaninglessness** - Life seems inherently meaningless and a random process. Lack of meaning can lead to hopelessness, discouragement, and a sense of emptiness
 - 4. Freedom and responsibility** - We have both the freedom and the responsibility to make choices that create a worthwhile existence for ourselves in the limited time we have on earth

Existential and Neurotic anxiety



- Everyone experiences the four ultimate concerns of the human condition and, according to existentialist theory, that creates feelings of anxiety in everyone
- Existential anxiety – **inevitable part** of the human condition. a **positive sign** rather than a pathological state; it indicates that people recognize the need to **accept responsibility** for their lives and are **engaged in efforts** to create a worthwhile and meaningful existence. Living **authentic** lives
- Existential guilt and neurotic anxiety – **lack awareness** of our physical world, our relationships, and our psychological world; **fail** to take **responsibility** for making our lives meaningful and worthwhile; and realize that **we have not** become what we **might have**
- Depression – often a result of efforts to defend against existential guilt and anxiety.

Human development

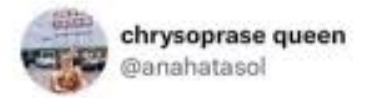
- They do not dispute the importance of early development and the child-parent relationship
- Frankl believed that **so-called neurotic difficulties** often stem from an upbringing in which parents were **punitive** and **deprived children of freedom**
- Existential therapists concentrate on the **unconscious conflict** between people's wish to **escape the givens** of the human condition and lose themselves in **lethargy and denial** and their wish to **achieve fulfillment** despite the **challenges and responsibilities** that achievement entails.
- **Emotional difficulties** stem from **failure** to **deal successfully** with the **inevitable of the human condition** and to **transcend** them by creating a **meaningful and authentic** life for oneself.
- They pay attention to **development throughout life span.**



Dasein

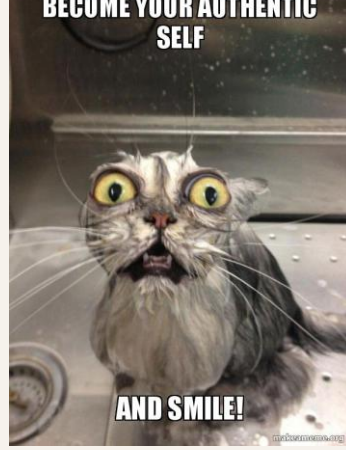
- "The term dasein acknowledges that human beings exist, have consciousness, and are responsible for their own existence"
 - **Umwelt**
 - **Mitwelt**
 - **Eigenwelt**
 - **Uberwelt**
- The concept of dasein is complex and elusive, but reflects people's ability to **simultaneously live in the present**, be conscious, and take responsibility for making their lives meaningful, while realizing fully that **death** will inevitably **end their efforts**.
- It reflects a dynamic process of potential and becoming rather than a fixed state.
- Mental health exists when all 4 aspects are in harmony

Potentials of the human condition



"you're so self aware" thanks it's ruining my life

- Existential therapy is an **optimistic** and **hopeful** approach that seeks to integrate the **somatic** (physical), **psychic** (psychological), and **noetic** (spiritual) dimensions of man
- The human spirit has a **healthy core** and what has been called "**existential courage**"
- People's many strengths:
 - 1. Awareness** – have a capacity for awareness of both themselves and the world. Although awareness will **not always** bring us **pleasure or peace**, it allows us to recognize the **limitations and challenges** of our lives and make **wise choices** that can make our lives worthwhile



2. Authenticity – Taking responsibility for **making choices** based on **awareness** reflects **authenticity** and allows people to **live more fully** in the present and be themselves in their relationships. People whose decisions are based on **denial**, the **wishes of others**, or dependence are **not** truly living in the **present**. In addition, they are wearing a "mask of **inauthenticity**". Bugental described **3 essential features** of authenticity:

1. People are aware of themselves and their relationships with the world.
2. They make choices, knowing that decisions are the inevitable consequences of responsibility.
3. They take responsibility for their choices, recognizing that awareness is imperfect, and sometimes leads to unanticipated results.

3. Freedom and responsibility – Freedom can be viewed as consisting of 4 aspects: **awareness, choice, action, and change**. Once people accept that they have freedom, no matter what their circumstances are, they have the responsibility:

- To be aware of their past history, their current options, and their future potential
- To make choices that give meaning to their lives
- To exercise courage and thought in taking action toward life-enhancing change.

Once we see that **we have choice**, we can **no longer view** our decisions and behaviors as purposeless and accidental, make excuses for ourselves, and shift blame for our unhappiness to others.

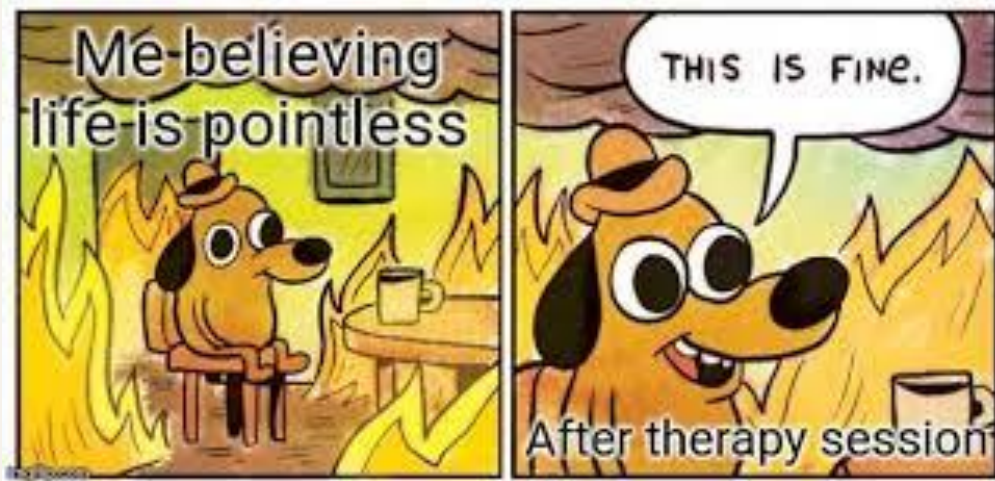




4. **Actualization** – each person has an **essential nature**, part of which is **universal** and part of which is **unique to that individual** (Maslow). The **will toward actualization** is an **innate and natural** process that leads people toward **realization of their potential** and toward **growth and fulfillment**
5. **Making meaning** – Life has the **potential to be meaningful** if people use their capacities to **bring purpose and worth into their lives**. According to May, our **will to love** and **to live** gives us meaning. Meaning is the **purpose and logic** of our lives and often is **reflected in choices** people make. **Dreams, visions, and fantasies** also provide clues to meaning. **Subjective** to each person

existentialists trying to create
meaning in a meaningless world





Therapeutic process

- **Goals**
 - Help people find **value, meaning, and purpose** in their lives
 - To **assist clients** in moving **toward authenticity** and **learning** to **recognize** when they are deceiving themselves
 - Helping clients **face anxiety** and **engage in action** that is based on the **authentic purpose** of **creating a worthy existence**.
 - Help clients be **more present**, identify ways they **block themselves** from **fuller presence**, challenge them to **assume responsibility**, and to encourage them to chose **more expanded ways** of being in their daily lives.

Therapeutic alliance

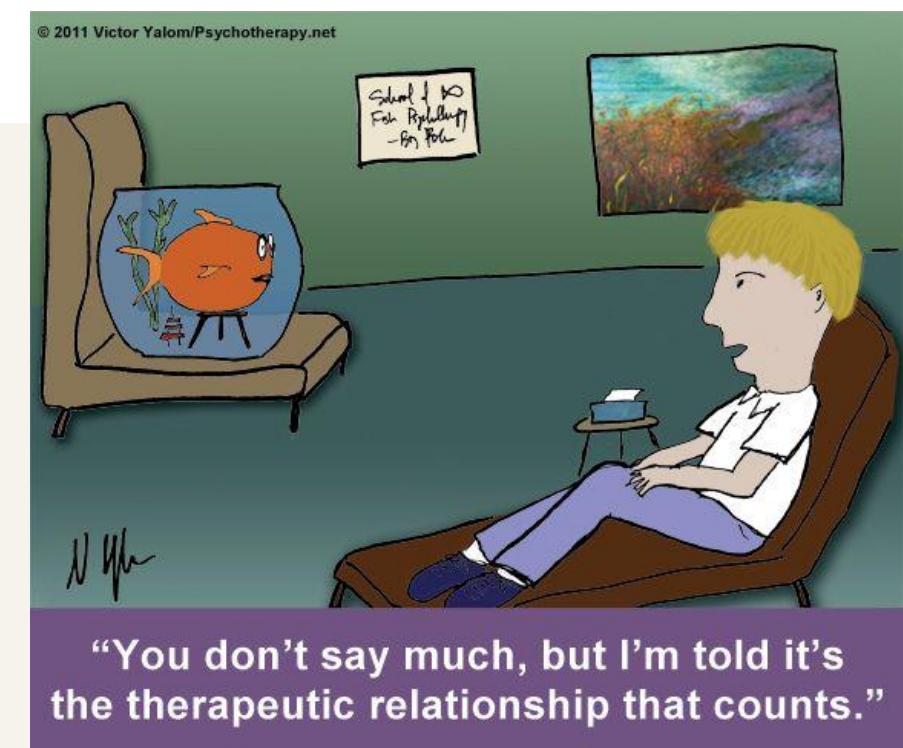
- **I-to-thou** relationship: in which people have the **deepest respect for each other** as well a **great sense of relatedness**.
- Most **profound and meaningful relationship**. Focus even more on the **therapeutic** relationship as an expression of **intimacy, openness, and real human exchange**.
- **Clinician self-disclosure is important**. Therapists advocate **freedom and authenticity**, encourage people to **confront their fears**, and promote their efforts to make **meaningful choices**. Existential clinicians do not hold back their views, give advice, use humor, and make suggestions and interpretations but always **allow clients** the **freedom to determine how they will use this input**

when you're giving someone advice but you gotta finish it with "but idk tho" in case it ruins their life



Challenges to I-to-thou relationship

- Being an existential counselor **requires openness** to **perpetual learning** and the ability to **maintain an intense level of involvement** with a client through some of their **most difficult experiences**
- Therapists who have **not come to terms** with their **own fears about death and dying** may be more likely to **avoid or "selectively inattend"** to such **material** presented by their client



Process of treatment

- Almost **never time limited/rushed. No clear stages** or transitions
- **Beginning phase:**
 - developing **clinicians' understanding** of their **clients** and **clients' awareness** of **themselves** and their **world**.
 - Encouraged to describe their **values, beliefs, and assumptions**; their **histories and backgrounds**; and the choices they have made, as well as the choices they believe they cannot make.
- **Middle phase:**
 - enables people to **use the information** they have shared to find **purpose, meaning, and value**. Therapist interventions encourage **client authenticity** during this process

Process of treatment

- **Closing phase:**
 - when people can **implement their awareness** of themselves and move forward to establish more meaningful lives.
 - Have found ways to live full lives **despite anxiety** about the inevitabilities of the human condition.
 - They are progressing along a path that seems **natural and right** for them and is helping them become **actualized**.
 - An important and challenging aspect of concluding treatment is the **client's separation** from the clinician. This can be a reminder of the inescapable endings in life.

Specific intervention strategies

therapist: What do you want to say to your inner child?

client: Trauma made us funny

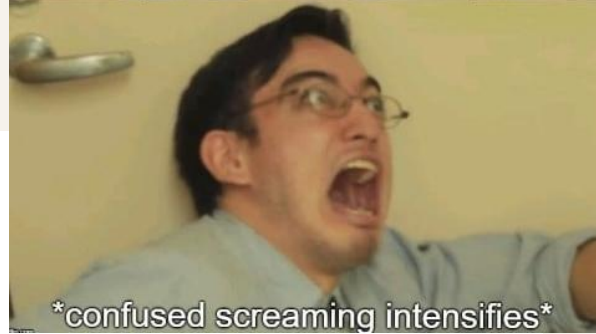
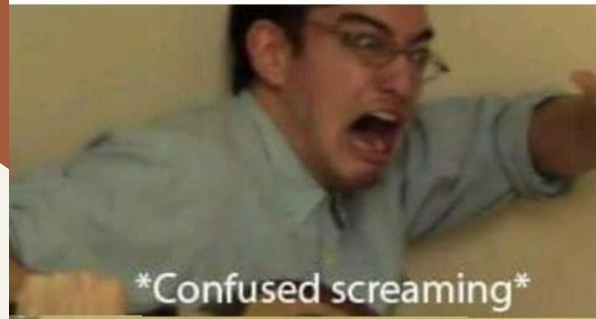
therapist: ... No.

- Therapists do not use techniques but they do focus on important aspects related to being-in-the-world
- **Symbolic growth experience** - Both Frankl (1963) and Maslow (1968) described the **learning and growth** that came from **intense experiences**. Willard Frick, building on the ideas of Frankl and Maslow, described a model, the **Symbolic Growth Experience (SGE)**, to explain the relationship between experience and the discovery of meaning. 4 steps:

1. People are educated about the concept of the SGE.
2. They select a salient past experience and explore its importance and symbolism in their lives.
3. They are helped to understand the meaning embedded in the experience.
4. They have a clearer sense of that meaning and are able to repeat their use of these strategies to grasp the significance of other experiences.

Specific intervention strategies

Being **afraid** of being afraid.



- **Logotherapy and paradoxical intention**

- Helped people recognize the depth of their **need for meaning**, reassured them that **all people can create meaning in their lives**, and supported them in their efforts to find purpose and meaning
- **"The fear of fear increases fear"**
- **Paradoxical intention** - clinicians encourage clients to do or wish for the very thing they fear most
- For example, a woman was afraid to leave her house lest she faint. Frankl instructed her to go outside and try her best to faint.

Specific intervention strategies

- **Dereflection**

- a type of **paradoxical intervention** that is based on "two essential qualities of human existence, namely man's capacities of **self-transcendence and self-detachment**"
- Dereflection takes the focus **away** from the **person** and helps them concentrate less on themselves and **more** on **other people or goals** they find **meaningful**
- **reduce compulsive self-observation** and **redirect clients' attention** in a more **positive** manner, helping them **discover meaning** in situations in the **present moment**, rather than becoming trapped in obsessive worry.
- Originally formulated to treat couples with **sexual dysfunction**. Can also be useful in **group therapy**

Specific intervention strategies

- **Addressing the four dimensions of the human condition**

- Suggested responses to concerns about these 4 conditions:

- Faith in our own existence in the present can ameliorate fears of death.
- Love is the authentic response to isolation.
- Drawing on our inner creativity, to find ways to realize our potential, can counteract the inherent meaninglessness of life.
- Responsibility and commitment, making choices and staying with them, help us cope with our overabundance of freedom.

Application

- **Diagnostic groups:** Appropriate for people with long-standing, pervasive anxiety or depression and those who are coping with life and death matters such as grief and loss, diagnosis of a terminal illness, or transitioning between phases of life. other anxiety disorders such as **post-traumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, and panic disorder** also may respond well to the existential clinician's efforts to help them **explore and understand** the **meaning of their fears** so that they can develop an **acceptance** of what is happening in their lives
- **Multicultural groups:** Vontress has been integrating existential therapy with cross-cultural counselling. Western traditional healing models tend to segment people into physical, psychological, social, and spiritual parts in order to treat each separately. NonWestern healing models are holistic and treat the "whole" person.

Application

- **Other groups:** Though there is insufficient evidence to firmly establish the approach's effectiveness in other groups, research does suggest a broad application for existential therapy. Studies reflect the type of person and situation for whom existential therapy seems best suited:
 - People coping with life-threatening and chronic illnesses
 - Those whose lives have challenging limitations, such as people who are incarcerated, people with disabilities, and people living in poverty
 - Those who have suffered important losses, such as bereavement, disappointments in relationships, and failure to achieve their goals
 - People who have had traumatic experiences
 - People with long-standing mild-to-moderate anxiety or depression
 - People at a crossroads in their lives who are looking for direction, such as those who are recently divorced, approaching midlife, retired, or graduated from college.

Application

- Van Deurzen (2002b) suggests that this form of therapy is most appropriate for clients who:
 - are **committed** to dealing with their **problems about living,**
 - feel **alienated** from the current expectations of society,
 - are **searching for meaning** in their lives.
 - are at a **crossroads**
 - question the state of affairs in the world and are willing to challenge the status quo.
 - are on the **edge of existence**, such as those who are **dying** or **contemplating suicide,**
 - are working through a **developmental or situational crisis**, who feel that they **no longer belong** in their surroundings, or who are starting a **new phase of life.**

Evaluation

- **Limitations:**

- Does not offer specific steps and has few strategies for intervention
- Treatment may be a leisurely and lengthy process and people may be skeptical of its values, reluctant or unable to engage in the thinking and self-exploration that it requires, and find its underlying philosophy unacceptable.
- This approach does not seek to directly ameliorate symptoms and its practitioners acknowledge that symptoms may or may not abate after existential treatment.

- **Strengths:**

- Broadened the reaches of psychotherapy beyond pathology and symptoms
- a holistic and growth-promoting approach that de-emphasizes pathology and has relevance to everyone.



Thank You!

Do you have any questions for me before we go?