Counseling Adolescent Existential Issues

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Introduction

• Although much has been written about adolescent development, few publications address their existential needs.
• An existential approach has traditionally been reserved for working with clients who are either nearing the twilight years or could financially afford a long term counseling relationship.
• An existential approach to counseling can be effective for individuals from all walks of life and all ages.
Adolescent Development as an Existential Process

- Children begin to acquire the ability to think abstractly at approximately age 12
- The capacity for abstract thought tends to influence many aspects of adolescent life, particularly thoughts on religion, politics, family, community, and education.
Psychosocial Development

• Existential counseling theory is rooted in a mid-20th century philosophy that sought to explain some of the most basic questions of human existence.
• These questions center around four themes: death, meaninglessness, isolation, and responsibility/freedom.
• Examples of these existential questions include: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What can I believe? Where do I belong?
Psychosocial Development

• The fifth stage of Erikson’s theory, identity vs. role diffusion is the period that coincides with adolescence. At this stage, the adolescent begins to consider questions of his or her own existence, self-identity, meaning in life, and the changing role of authority.

• Inherent in the process of separating from parents is the growing sense of isolation, a common presenting feature in adolescent clients and a fundamental aspect of existential angst.
Psychosocial Development

• Separating oneself from the identity as ‘a child of mom and dad,’ one has not yet discovered one’s individual identity.

• The process of separation can create feelings of isolation from the familiar. It may even create feelings of isolation from the self.
Psychosocial Development

• Between the ages of 11 and 16, children progressively shift their emotional dependence from their parents to peer groups. The means by which this shift of importance occurs may be due to the process of attribute substitution.

• To this assertion, the adolescent may be caught between the tension of self as authority, expressed as freedom/autonomy, and accountability for one’s choices, expressed as responsibility.
Existential Angst

• From an existential viewpoint, the inherent angst of isolation motivates the adolescent to seek belongingness.

• A major task of adolescence is to find peers who accept one’s uniqueness, while at the same time conforming to identified groups.

• Existential theorists make a compelling argument that the adolescent’s strife for group membership is a direct reaction to a fear of isolation and meaninglessness.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• Finding an appropriate balance between autonomy and reliance on one’s caretakers is experienced by most adolescents.

• Awareness of this developmental need can provide motivation for adolescent clients by framing the work of counseling in a light of attaining the very freedom-to, freedom-from, freedom-with, and freedom-for status that they seek.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• Yalom’s remark, “It is the relationship that heals” bodes well in this regard.
• Evidence that a strong therapeutic relationship will itself produce positive change in adolescents.
• Adolescents need the opportunity and safe space to express the feelings regarding what it is like being an adolescent.
• It may be wise for the therapist to spend a substantial amount of time building the client’s self-esteem.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• Leveling the power differential with a young client can strengthen the adolescent’s self-concept. This might be accomplished if the counselor will put herself in the position of student.

• Allow the client to teach the counselor about what it is like to be an adolescent in today’s world. A sincere and inquisitive stance by the counselor may help create trust within the adolescent.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• It is helpful when the counselor admits when he is wrong about an assumption. This gesture, again, allows the adolescent client to see the counselor in a light very different from their usual adult evaluators.

• Before the end of the counseling relationship, allow the adolescent client to know that you, the counselor, have learned valuable information from your experience with him.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• A therapeutic intervention attempted without previously established rapport, empathy, and trust will seem, to many adolescents, as a covert attempt to manipulate them.

• A humble and genuine demeanor bodes well when working with adolescents.
Adolescent Counselor’s Stance

• A therapist’s level of genuineness is effective in generating positive change.
• Adolescents have a keen sense of detection for pretentiousness and insincerity.
• A counselor showing deep respect for the adolescent client is also an effective way of gaining entry into his world.
“Being There” Exercise
“I am” Exercise

• Write 2-3 statements beginning with “I am ...”.
• Goal of the exercise is to move from attribute (adjective) to essence (noun).
• Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute of Self</th>
<th>Essence of Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am compassionate.</td>
<td>I am compassion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am peaceful.</td>
<td>I am peace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
De-Role Exercise

• On each of 3 cards (distributed at beginning of session), identify a role that you play in your life.

• Examples:
  • I am a husband/wife/partner
  • I am a parent/child/sibling
  • I am a professor/counselor/...
  • I am a pet owner.
  • I am an athlete/researcher/sports fan...
# Authenticity Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things that People Think About Me</th>
<th>Things that I want Others to Think About Me</th>
<th>Things That are True About Me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References

• A list of references will be made available by the presenters
De-Role Exercise

Derived from Dr. Irving Yalom

Purpose

To strip away roles from essential being; To discover one’s being independent of roles that define being; To shape the role and not let the role shape you; To get closer to the core self by divesting of roles

Procedure

1. List on separate notecards, five important answers to the question “Who am I?”

2. Arrange the cards in order of importance and significance with the answers closest to the core self at the bottom and the peripheral answers at the top.

3. Study the top card for 2 or 3 minutes and contemplate what life would be like to give up that attribute, characteristic or role.

4. Go on to the next card until you have divested the self of all 8 attributes

5. Then go through them in reverse

Awareness Questions

Discuss in the group what one learned about the self

Possible Results

1. Enhanced self-knowledge

2. New understanding of existential anxiety

3. Greater ability to simply BE

4. Feeling of peace

5. Enhanced understanding of how roles inhibit or limit being
Being-There Exercise
Derived from Heidegger’s “dasein”

Overview
A simple and fun activity, ideal as an icebreaker, illustration or a longer exercise to demonstrate how people can run on set lines/routines, without noticing things and people around us.

Purpose
To learn to BE ; the “clearing” ; To be able to “BE” in any situation ; without engaging automatic nonbeing ; Accepting everything ; Resisting nothing ; resistance reduces being ; being lost in the mind reduces being

Procedure
Sitting and simply being
a) Being and doing nothing but being
b) Not thinking or doing breathing, just being
c) If being stops, simply deciding to be and continue

Can be done in many contexts
alone ; with eyes open ; with eyes closed ; with another person ; with the pathology of others ; with the irritations toward others ; in the face of adversity in life situations ; being there in the face of anxiety

Possible Results
1. Spiritual strength
2. Power to engage life and living
3. Sense of peace
4. Feeling of being alive

Awareness Questions
What color are the floor tiles in the hotel reception area?
What was the name of the person who introduced this session?
What was the color of that person’s outfit?
How many plastic cards are currently in your wallet?

Process Questions
What stops us from being present?
When are we most aware of the world around us?
How would “Being There”, wherever we are, affect our identity / sense of self?
How would “Being There”, wherever we are, affect our relationships?
“I am” exercise

Derived from Dr. Marta Adelsman

Overview

This assignment helps to counter the negativity in thinking toward self.

Purpose

This activity presupposes that human beings possess two facets:

1) A small, contracted self (often called the ego), and 2) a higher self, referred to as Being. The ego feeds on the drama that it creates in your life. “Being” is your deeper wisdom, who you are really and authentically. Being not only feels peaceful and joyful, it is joy, peace, love, truth, etc.

The ego creates drama so that you will forget all about your authentic Being. It dupes you into identifying with this drama as it acts out on the stage of your mind, your emotions and your relationships. You believe you ARE your sadness, or your harsh and angry words, or your victimhood.

The “I am” exercise replaces ego identification with a new way of thinking. It affirms the truth about you. It helps you know that you are not the drama. In your authentic Being, you embody wonderful, positive characteristics. You simply state “I am” and follow it with a Being trait.

Those who start this activity will initially attribute adjectives to the self. This is a natural reaction to not entirely owning positive characteristics. Phrases like “I am peaceful, I am joyful, I am wise, I am abundant,” etc. are common.

The ultimate step would be for the individual to transition their positive attributes into nouns. For example, “I am joy, I am peace, I am wisdom, I am success, and I am abundance.”

Procedure

Create your own “I am” statements. Write them down and repeat them aloud each day for 90 days. Breathe in each phrase and allow it to settle inside you before you move to the next one.

Adolescents typically react negatively to such a suggestion. They make statements such as “This is silly! It isn’t really true about me.”

Be prepared for the ego to throw up roadblocks of resistant thoughts and feelings. Persist in the action anyway.
Authenticity Exercise

Derived from Dr. Fred J. Hanna

Overview

In our society, we wear several different masks to appease the needs of the others in our lives. This process creates a level of anxiety when we do not allow ourselves to be truly authentic.

Purpose

Reduce the amount of influence of the “They” when compromising the true self.

Procedure

1. Draw three long lines from the top of your paper to the bottom, creating three equal columns.
2. The first column is titled “What do people believe about you?” The second column is titled “What do you want people to believe about you?” The third column is titled “What is really true about you?”
3. On the left of each column, create rows 1 – 5 (more or less, depending on time and depth desired).
4. Each item in each column responds to the item that precedes it. For example, if I state as #1 in my first column, “I am a generous person”, then my response to #1 in my second column might read “I am generous to all people, in all situations”, then my response to my #1 item in my final column might read, “I am only generous if I believe I might benefit in some way.”
5. Continue this process until all bulleted items are complete.

Awareness Questions

Discuss the contrast between the real and false selves

Possible Results

1. A fuller sense of real self
2. Enhanced understanding of how one presents to others
3. Enhanced understanding of pressures to be false or disingenuous
4. Greater freedom to be oneself