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What is existential psychology?

1. Existential psychology is the branch of psychology that deals with each human being's relationship to the most essential life dilemmas.
2. Three basic life concepts
 - Life feeling: Rollo May describes what he calls the I-am-experience. It is the spontaneous experience of just being here. Simply because I am here, I also have the right to be here, the right to exist. I experience my own being and develop life feeling. If a person can spontaneously experience that they live, they will thereby get to know their own basic values.
 - Ronald D Laing has also described an aspect of our life feeling. He has coined the term "ontological security" and the antonym "ontological insecurity". A person can have a sense of their being in the world as a real, alive and whole person who lives in temporal continuity. This person can step forward and meet others with clarity.
 - Life courage: According to Paul Tillich, life courage is the courage to be, is a phenomenon comprising both a natural component and a moral component. The courage to live is a conscious attitude in which one affirms one's being alive in spite of what works against this basic affirmation of life. Hence life courage may be defined as a fundamental, spontaneous life feeling combined with a consciously chosen courage to live, developed through the confrontation with existential anxiety. Life courage is a basic mood or attunement in a person that tells us about this person's wish to live, their basic character, and their will to face life's challenges and difficulties.
 - Life energy: Human beings can transcend any given situation and thereby create something beyond themselves. The more they possess of this creative force, the more vitality they have. In other words, the biological dimensions of humankind are interwoven in a structure of meaning. "Vitality", says Tillich, "is not something which can be separated from the totality of man's being, his language, his creativity, his spiritual life, his ultimate concern".
 - Much seems to indicate that around the time of birth, life energy is predominantly biological, but also influenced by love and interpersonal contact. Later on, vitality is increasingly transformed into something more

specifically marked by the life meaning and life tasks that are unique to each human being, even though it is sustained by a strong biological component throughout life.

3. The basic life conditions are sometimes seen as relatively straightforward categories or realities, but each may also be viewed as a dilemma representing two opposite poles between which our life is torn and between which it must find a balance. I favor the latter view, seeing the basic conditions as dilemmas, because this view accentuates the choices we always face as human beings. Existential theorists subscribing to this view would suggest that there are a number of given ontological facts (e.g. that one day we will die), but that these facts present themselves to us in the form of life dilemmas.
4. By a life dilemma we understand a situation in which the choice stands between two poles that both fall within what we normally expect out of life. Both belong to what you perceive to be a reasonable or happy life. But you cannot see how you can reconcile them or integrate them. For the purposes of this theoretical synthesis, the existential theories have been integrated into six basic life dilemmas and life questions. Each of them forms the content of one of the subsequent chapters of the book.
 - Happiness vs. Suffering: How can I strive towards happiness when I know that my life will inevitably contain suffering?
 - Love vs. Aloneness: Is it possible to overcome my basic aloneness in a love relationship? Can I still be myself in a love relationship? And is it at all possible to find love in this world?
 - Adversity vs. Success: When I find myself in dire straits following an accident or a loss or some other serious life event, how can I deal with that situation in such a way that I will grow from it instead of shrinking and getting stuck?
 - Death Anxiety vs. Life Commitment: Knowing that death can arrive at any time, how can I transcend my anxiety and commit myself fully to life?
 - Free choice vs. the Obligations of your life reality: Given the physical, financial and social realities of my life and origin, which I did not ask for, how can I make these realities my own positive and constructive choice? And how can I create a worthwhile future life through my choices?
 - Life meaning vs. Meaninglessness: Given the chaotic character of our present world, how may I define the meaning and values of my life and find a clear direction for it?
5. Authentic means genuine or known to be true. To live authentically means to live truthfully; that is, in accordance with your own deep convictions, beliefs and

values. To live authentically also means to find your own two feet in relation to the basic life dilemmas.

6. The existential definition of authentic living has more to do with form than with content. It is the shape of the existence that counts, the extent to which it has achieved unity rather than being scattered, the way it exercises freedom and self-determination; rather than being determined by the prevailing tastes and standards. To live authentically is to recognize that each human being is unique and to accept the personal consequence that, this being so, one has to find one's very own determination and realize one's own potential.
7. Existential guilt is a positive element in people's life. It points out the areas in which you have not as yet lived up to the possibilities that were offered to you, including the possibility to treat others and nature with care and respect. Therefore, although it may be painful, existential guilt is a change to redirect the rest of your life and to reach some sort of reconciliation with that which cannot be changed.

Happiness and suffering

1. Buhler was struck by the fact that the life of any individual, viewed in its entirety, was characterized by inner coherence, by a unifying or integrating principle. She called this integrating principle intentionality, a concept she probably adapted from Husserl's philosophy. Buhler understood intentionality as the life expectations and life tasks that seemed to permeate the lives of the people she studied. Later, as she investigated ordinary people of different ages and gained more experience with clients in therapy, she realized that all human beings apparently have ideas about what they would like to achieve in life. She subsequently introduced the concept of the life goal as an overall term for the way in which humans direct their lives towards something.
2. Buhler divided life into five stages, all defined by the individual's relationship to their life goals: (1) the individual develops will, identity and competence to choose; (2) the individual makes preliminary choices about life goals; (3) the individual makes specific and definitive choices of a number of life goals; (4) the individual reviews their life and re-orientates themselves regarding the content of the remaining part of life; and (5) the individual rounds off their life and reflects on how good or successful it has been, seen in relation to the individual's own life goals and life values.
3. According to Buhler, what determines the person's life satisfaction is the way he or she interprets life. Your life goals may be clearly formulated or quite vague and implicit, but they still crop up as a theme at the evening of life. Buhler maintains that you become unhappy if you neglect important life goals that you contain.

4. There are several areas of suffering. First there is (1) physical suffering, consisting in somatic pain or discomfort. Secondly, we have (2) mental or psychological suffering in the form of anxiety, depression, grief, remorse and other painful psychological states. It makes sense to talk about (3) social suffering, in terms of being excluded from social participation, not being recognized, being exposed to racism, xenophobia, and other prejudices or being subjected to hostile or aggressive acts; and (4) spiritual suffering, when a person feels pain in relation to the state of our planet or the world as a whole or in relation to the selfishness and deplorable moral attitudes of our time.
5. Four ways of dealing with suffering
 - Controlling the disease: the concept of coping has become a standard term in health literature. The basic idea is that if you are afflicted with illness or pain, the decisive factor is how you handle or manage the situation, the idea of mastering or coping with the illness.
 - Entering into a dialogue with the disease: An individual who is afflicted with a disease is faced with the task of finding a way to live with it. They must try to find out if the disease can be made to disappear or if it has come to stay. They have to make friends with the disease or at least get on speaking terms with it. Disease is a phenomenon; the individual has to enter into a dialogue with it. Dialogue entails listening. In this context, dialogue is understood as internal dialogue; that is, a conversation the individual is having with themselves. If someone wishes to engage in a dialogue with their disease, they have to ask and listen with an open mind, reflect on what the disease has to say to them, explore the demands that the disease has for not making itself too drastically felt.
 - Seeing the disease as a gift: At this point in time, the individual is compelled to make a very difficult choice: either to accept the new state of affairs and reformulate the meaning of their life, that is change what they live for, or to reject the new state of affairs and cling to the old meaning.
 - Experiencing disease as a limit situation: Karl Jaspers distinguished between normal situations and limit situations. A normal situation is one that I can to a certain extent deal with, one that I can compare to other known situations; one that I can influence and co-create; one that I may step in and out of. The limit situation is defined by the fact that it does not change. It is related to our lives in a way which is irrevocable. Jaspers mentions facing death and having to tolerate suffering as examples of such limit situations. In these situations, the limit or boundary cannot be moved. Existentially, addressing the limit situation means coming to terms with its

specific nature and not trying to avoid this reality by speculating about all sorts of other situations that now will not come to pass.

6. We have in fact two concepts of happiness: bliss and deep happiness. These two concepts somehow reflect the stance of humanistic and existential psychology respectively.
7. By bliss we understand a state of mind during which the individual feels that all essential needs have been fulfilled and that all essential goals have been reached. The individual feels fulfilled and in some cases even merged with the surroundings or nature itself. Such a state of mind presupposes the exclusion of suffering. Therefore it usually does not last very long.
8. Medard Boss has approached and put into words this existential perspective on happiness. His interest was in understanding the ideal way of being. He developed a truly unique expression for the ideal human being-in-the-world: composed, joyous serenity. The first component regards being free, that is, unbounded by conventions; you are not a slave, not someone who necessarily has to behave like everyone else or as customs dictate. You may follow your inner voice, your calling. The second component is joy, that is, gaiety, liveliness, vitality. The third component is that there should be serenity, in other words, equanimity, the clarity and the ability to respectfully let the world be.

Love and aloneness

1. The central aspects of love may thus be described as (1) a relationship characterized by a unique connectedness, closeness and sincerity, in which (2) the parties give and receive, that is, exchange symbolic or real gifts, where (3) the relationship is characterized by the ability to let the other person be, and (4) characterized by being a meeting between two people who open themselves to one another as an event that occurs and overwhelms.
2. Isolation means that a human being is socially alone, encountering sensations such as feeling alone on travels, at work or in the home. Isolation can be thrust on you as well as voluntary, and it may therefore be accompanied by widely differing emotional states. To be isolated is neither inherently good nor bad, it depends on what the person wants.
3. Loneliness is a feeling of being left to one's own devices and one's own destiny when you would really rather be with others. Feeling lonely is usually negative, often painful, connected with an experience of being abandoned, let down or ostracized against one's own will.
4. Aloneness signifies the basic recognition that you are alone in the world. The awareness of being alone may emerge in case of illness and death or when

traveling in a foreign country. To be alone may be both terrifying and stimulating, depending on the person's natural inclinations and the situational context.

5. In contemporary society there are, says Erich Fromm, three mechanisms of escape that the individual may resort to in order to assuage his or her fear of standing alone. The first one is to throw oneself into an authoritarian relationship or symbiosis, to fuse with someone or something outside oneself, be it another person or an organization. In other words, the individual is driven into the arms of someone or something else so that the two entities merge and enter into mutual dependence. The second mechanism of escape pointed out by Fromm is destructiveness. Destructiveness has traits in common with symbiosis, but is directed towards the actual destruction of someone or something. If I feel powerless and lonely confronted with the world outside, I can destroy it. The third mechanism of escape is what Fromm calls automaton conformity. The individual ceases to be themselves and instead adopts the kind of personality that is prescribed by the prevailing cultural pattern. The individual becomes like everybody else.
6. Can a social relation be both longstanding and really alive at the same time? The solution lies in a distinction between authentic and inauthentic interaction. In authentic interaction suppresses our genuine core of being. It dehumanizes and depersonalizes. It imposes sameness and shuns everything that departs from the norm. Authentic interaction, on the other hand, lets the human being emerge in its entirety, freely and responsibly. Only by breaking out of distorted, inauthentic forms of interaction is it possible to genuinely be together. If a person wishes to belong to long-lasting, committed families, groups and communities and at the same time maintain their aliveness, life feeling and potentials for development, the interaction has to be authentic. If the interaction is inauthentic, it will lead to conflict between the individual and the social surroundings. If the individual wishes to thrive for many years with the same love partner, the same colleagues and the same friends, they will have to exhibit all aspects of themselves in the relationship. Only in this way can the self, the relationship and the other(s) all be in a process of continued becoming.

Adversity and success

1. To be in a crisis is an unusual condition. It is dramatic and extraordinary, but it does belong to normal life. Everybody can expect to experience such a condition once, a few times, or even several times during their lifetime. Important characteristics of this state of this shock are: (1) your structures of space and time (the routines for what you do where and when) have partly broken down; (2) you

experience strong and oscillating feelings; and (3) you experience intense mental activity, but your thoughts run in circles or revolve around the same topics instead of engaging in continuous problem solving.

2. Life and crisis belong together. That is the main tenet of the existential philosopher Otto Bollnow. A crisis is a disruption of the normal course of life. The disruption arises for as long as the crisis lasts. Crises are 'events that due to their critical and dangerous nature stand out from the continuous flow of life in general'. Risk is a crucial element in any crisis: illness may lead to death, a marital crisis to divorce, and a political crisis to war. But the crisis need not necessarily lead to disaster. The experience of living through the crisis may involve the overcoming of danger, experiences of relief and, on a deeper level, a cleansing, the elimination of old issues of conflict and the attainment of a new and higher level of stability.
3. From an existential point of view, the most important qualification for the helper in a crisis situation is the ability to be present. The crisis-stricken person first of all needs an empathic helper who assists without having projects of their own. It is co-being that helps.
4. Crisis as loss: A serious crisis often involves four kinds of loss. For professionals that help other people through their crises, it is crucial to be aware of all these types of loss, so that they can all be dealt with in the helping process.
 - Physical loss
 - Psychological loss
 - Loss of meaning and world view
 - Existential loss
5. Crisis as adversity: What is given is our destiny. We must accept it or come to terms with it. You cannot change such facts. You must accept them as your basis, your existential ground. If you do not accept them, you will be living on false pretences. You will shut yourself off from your own ground.
6. Crisis as opening of existence: According to Yalom, to be struck by a crisis is a disruptive, but also fertile opportunity to find one's position in relation to these four basic existential dilemmas.
7. How do I get through a crisis?
 - You have to let feelings and moods emerge and to sense and express them: It is important to discover these feelings, sense them and become aware of them. You have to get to know them; you have to accept and acknowledge them. It is necessary to realize that these feelings are part of yourself. What matters is to get on speaking terms with them, to establish an inner dialogue with them.
 - You must try to reintegrate spilt-off material so that the self is healed: An

important part of the repair process consists in the individual's exploration and confrontation of their beliefs and assumptions about what kind of person they are. Such deep held assumptions will block a person not only from the memories that were rejected during the particular event, but also from generally being able to encounter important aspects of the world openly.

- You should embrace this unique chance to reconsider the meaning and direction of your life: any helper should always respect the other person's feeling of meaninglessness and continue just to be present for them. If this is achieved, sooner or later life's own forces will usually reassert themselves in an effort to construct a new meaning in life.

Death anxiety and life commitment

1. Yalom uses the concept of death anxiety in an approximate way. In point of fact, 'anxiety' designates a condition of terror with no object, while fear is a similar condition directed towards a specific object. Thus death anxiety is a generalized terror of annihilation or non-being, while fear of death is terror of specific death-related events. Yalom finds that death anxiety in its generalized pure form is rarely seen in psychotherapy. Fear of death or defense mechanisms are much more common.
2. Condrau sees a distinctive connection between death anxiety on the one hand and fascination of or longing for death on the other. Anxiety begins fascination. Anxiety and renunciation are also an escape from something that fascinates. What is the origin of all these forms of death anxiety? Condrau lists two central sources: The first source is that the individual's life may not have been lived and fulfilled completely. The second source of death anxiety originates in the insecure plight of the modern human being.
3. According to May, anxiety occurs when there is a conflict between being and nonbeing. Anxiety enters the scene when a new opportunity, a potential, emerges and confronts the individual with a new prospect of unfolding or fulfilling their life. But this opportunity entails the destruction of an established sense of security. Therefore a desire to reject the new opportunity arises. This is where anxiety comes in. Anxiety demonstrates the presence of potential, of some new possibility of being that is threatened by non-being. Anxiety emerges when a person is faced with the choice between unfolding or not unfolding a life potentiality. When a human being chooses not to fulfill that potentiality, another feeling sets in: guilt.
4. How can I help a dying person?
 - Avoid pursuing your own agenda with the dying person

- The best help is simply to be with the dying person

Free choice and the obligations of your life reality

1. A choice or a decision occurs when someone faces a situation with more than one possibility, considers the options and ends up by saying yes to one of them, thus not choosing something else.
2. Choice presupposes freedom. Freedom means to be able to do what one wants or believes to be right. Freedom entails autonomy. The opposite is constraint and force. If in a specific situation a person has more than one option, they have freedom of choice or freedom of action.
3. Choice entails responsibility. When you say yes to one thing and no to something else, this has consequences for others and for yourself. To be responsible is to accept the consequences of your own acts. To live responsibly means to live in full awareness of the consequences of your own acts. To have or to feel responsibility for something in particular is almost the same as having or feeling an obligation towards it.
4. When someone is committed to something, the will of that person is activated; this in turn leads to action when the decision is to be carried out in real life. Sometimes, such a decision can bear resemblance to a commitment or a leap into the unknown.
5. An obligation is something you have to do, but the term implies that you acknowledge your duty to do it. A necessity is something you have to do whether you like it or not.
6. According to Rollo May, the essential decisions are made through a combination of wish and will. For Rollo May, the main problem is the transition from wish to will. May defines wish as the imagination playing with the possibility of a certain action or state. He understands will as the individual's ability to organize themselves so that a movement can take place in a certain direction or towards a specific goal. The first stage is the formation of a wish. To be aware, to sense what is going on in yourself is crucial here. The second stage is the transformation of wish into will. The central element here is consciousness, the fact that we know what we want and would like to do. In the third stage, will is transformed to decision and responsibility. May sees decision-making as a coordination of wish and will and their continuation in the form of actual acts and self-realization.
7. According to Otto Rank, the problems connected with making life decisions first of all originate in a lack of willpower. Many people have an insufficiently developed will of their own. The will is developed through three phases: (1) the

phase of negative will: The individual is in opposition to the other person's will. What is important here is for the parent or therapist to contain and receive the critical and negative expressions and outbursts. They should not fight them or withdraw, but be present. (2) The phase of positive will: The person wills and truly embraces what they must do. (3) The phase of the creative will: The individual formulates their own wishes and mobilizes their willpower in order to carry them through.

8. Karl Jaspers underlies the unique feature that decisions are often made in a certain spontaneous mood. An important choice is often something that seems to just happen. The individual is suffering and has to choose, but the choice to some extent makes itself automatically because greater forces seem to enter the scene. Whether it is nature, life itself or something else at work is impossible to say. But many existential choices are made on the basis of the person being in emotional pain and enduring that pain for a period of them.
9. Is it possible to plan and initiate a major life change? Can a human being freely decide that now things will have to change? Or are we in actual fact determined by forces outside ourselves in the shape of influences from the past or pressures from culture and society?
10. The existential conception offers a different understanding of the role of childhood. Each human being has more than one childhood. Stored somewhere in our memory, we all have an almost infinite number of earlier experiences that are in principle accessible to us. Among these experiences we "choose" to remember a limited number, often of a particular type, hue and basic mood. The mental states and actions of an individual spring from that individual's intentions, from what that person wants in this world. In any event, the childhood of a human being is an interpreted childhood and, as such, is open to re-interpretation.
11. It is possible to step out of the "they"-situations in order to discover new possibilities and to pursue them. The individual can indeed seize their own self and establish their own course. This is what Heidegger calls authentic living.
12. If you want to break the mould of determination from childhood and society on your present life and turn into a self-determining being, the key word is: responsibility. The right answer is to try to get into contact with your deeper life values and ask yourself questions like: If I do this, will I like myself more or less when I look in the mirror tomorrow? And: if I try to picture myself and the way I live five years from now as I look back on what I chose to do today, will I then be proud and happy thinking about myself, or the opposite? When you try to answer such questions, you assume responsibility. "Responsibility" literally means ability to respond.

13. You always have the possibility of getting out of the situation or changing it in some way. There is no situation that cannot be changed. In many cases, it is not possible to change the surrounding world, but in those instances you can change your own reactions and thereby the signals you send into the situation, which in turn transforms the situation itself.
14. To take responsibility for your own life means to acknowledge your way of life, your choices and omissions. But there is another side to this. In a very fundamental sense, you create the world you live in. To a very significant degree, what you see, perceive and think comes from within, even though it may seem as if it comes from the outside.
15. Responsibility is not only to acknowledge your own part. It is also to be there actively for others. Gabriel Marcel proposes the concepts of presence and availability.
16. Inspired by Martin Heidegger, Rollo May has tried to narrow down this state using the word care. According to May, care, as opposed to indifference and apathy, is the circumstance in which someone or something means something to you. Care is the source of human tenderness. Care is also a basic feature of human life.

To find the meaning in life in a chaotic world

1. The life of the modern individual has no pre-defined meaning. From time to time, modern human beings ask themselves why they live at all. They reflect on their values and on how to make their priorities. How, then, do people go about the task of finding or creating the meaning of their lives? Why is it easy for some, while others see their lives fall apart? Life is meaningful for people when they can see a pattern or purpose in the events of their lives. Conversely, it is meaningless when things seem to crumble and you cannot see the sense behind what you do or behind the events that fill up your life.
2. The term life meaning refers to the content with which people fill their lives. Life meaning imbues life with form and direction. A related concept is life goal. It refers to the objectives that people work towards and try to achieve. Life meaning and life goals are selected by each individual in accordance with more basic life values. Life values refer to the particular visions of the good life that form the basis of the life of an individual.
3. The viewpoint of neutrality maintains a principle of equal value. A person who espouses one life value cannot be the judge of another person who happens to have chosen differently. No one may claim the superiority of one kind of life goal or life value, pronouncing that one way of life is better or more worthwhile than

another.

4. The viewpoint of commitment can be found in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre. What counts is the manner in which a person commits themselves to a chosen way of life. People who devote themselves wholeheartedly to their work do so in an authentic way.
5. The viewpoint of necessity maintains that certain goals should be preferred in so far as they are needed by the world around us. Erich Fromm presents two fundamentally opposed modes of existence for our consideration, one oriented toward having and owning, the other toward being and living. When the mode of having is dominant, love for others will tend to be expressed in the form of setting limits, seeking to control others, to own them and to have rights over them. Loving acts take a different form when undertaken in the mode of being. They will then tend to focus on the enjoyment of being together, of giving to each other and inspiring each other. This mode of being on the other hand refers to lived experience. To be, according to Fromm, involves opening oneself to the world and relinquishing any tendency to egoism.
6. According to Victor Frankl, people fulfill their personal existence by realizing values. To live is to pursue a meaning in life, to struggle towards an important goal, to realize a value. Frankl pinpoints three kinds of value:
 - The creative values are realized in activities such as constructing and giving and are pursued in the spheres of work and family life. These values have an expansive character, tending to enlarge as well as establish the person's world.
 - The experiential values are realized in the ability to open oneself to the world and to respond to nature, art and love. To realize such values is to lead a life that is rich in experience.
 - The attitudinal values are realized in the ability to prepare oneself for the limitations of circumstance, the reality of suffering or perhaps the renunciation needed to cope with a harsh fate.
7. Frankl's account of these three kinds of life values sums up what people live for in our age. Each type of value is different in character and seems to correspond to a particular manner in which the human psyche functions. As Frankl understands it, each type tends to come into play in a given chronological order. The usual pattern is one whereby people try to realize the creative, expansive values while they are young, striving to mould their existence through their work and by building a family. Later in life, people tend to be more receptive to the values of experience as enjoyed in nature, art and the experience of loving. Towards the end of life, when fate may be less kind, they are presented with the task of finding a meaning

in their suffering.

8. Ultimately, nobody knows the true nature of this world: whether it is disorderly chaos or meaningful order. From an existential point of view, however, it is indisputable that the search for meaning is a fundamental characteristic of human nature. To find a rich and full meaning in one's life is thus a two-sided activity. One side is to learn to cherish what is already there for you; to learn to enjoy and be grateful for all the sensuous pleasures, emotional experiences and intellectual and social challenges that life offers. The other side is to acknowledge and appreciate that there is something out there which is more important than yourself; that you may find the greatest satisfaction by contributing to the world that gave birth to you.