

Aspects of Existential Psychotherapy in Cognitive Behavioral Approach

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Abstract

The therapeutic process aims the improvement of individuals' mental health and overall well-being through the acquirement of new relationship skills with self and the outer world. The purpose of psychotherapy is that of meeting the client's expectations as well as possible and to guide him in the direction of his choice and desire and needs, using psychological tools.

Currently there are numerous forms of psychotherapy such as psychoanalysis, schema therapy, existential psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral psychotherapy (CBT), rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), person-centered therapy (PCT), integrative psychotherapy, transactional analysis, core process therapy etc. Are there any major differences between all these forms of therapy? Which could be the best way to meet the expectations of the people who cross the thresholds of psychology cabinets? This subject can be amply debated. The present article shortly examines aspects of existential psychotherapy in the cognitive behavioral therapy, encouraging an eclectic approach.

The human being is a unique complex, and this is why the best approach encouraged by researchers is the one of being opened to the client's needs and to integrate in the therapeutic process not only specific strategies used in the forms of therapy in which the psychotherapist is specialized, but also complementary forms in order to be prepared for any challenge that can appear in the process. This way, we can serve the clients' needs in the most complete way possible (Strieker, 1996; Gersons et al., 2000; Norcross & Goldfried, 2005).

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I. INTRODUCTION

This subject can be one of amplitude and difficult to approach if we start by looking at things in a comparative perspective while taking into consideration efficiency, popularity and the differences between the therapy schools. We will stick to a gross coverage of the differences and similarities between the existential psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, in order to emphasize as clearly as possible the chosen topic, according to the main purpose. This paper aims to present the concepts which define the two forms of therapy brought in the spotlight, with the aid of specialty literature, to encourage a possible approach by blending these methods in the work with clients and last but not least, to encourage usage of eclectic methods of work, as a psychotherapist.

Although existential psychotherapy and the cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are based on different fundamentals, combining these two approaches in therapy can enrich the process of optimizing the clients' lives, by approaching existential themes that are characteristic to human beings (Frankl, 1994, as cited in Prasko et al., 2012).

Existentialism, although it seems a complicate concept looked through a philosophical perspective due to some writings full of jargons, it is neither undecipherable nor hard to analyze. It starts from the premises that any individual, in a certain moment of their lives, is confronted with the exploration, more or less conscious, of certain existential themes like death and the anxiety caused by it or the search for meaning (Frankl, 1994, as cited in Prasko et al., 2012; Yalom, 2012).

On this line, an example is Viktor Frankl himself, the founder of logotherapy (a form of existential analysis), who talks in his book "*Men's search for meaning*" about the meaning in an individual's life and to what extent it can affect a human being most profoundly. His own experience of a concentration camp during World War II, "offers" Frankl the context for reflection on his own persona and to focus on the existential themes, such as survival and the meaning of life itself, which later on he will display in his researches and writings, encouraging the existential approach in psychotherapy.

Existential psychotherapy has its roots in branches like philosophy and phenomenology and it is focused on the awareness of self and on the capacities of the individual to confront with fundamental issues of existence like loneliness, the sense and meaning in life, freedom and the unavoidable death. The lens through which individuals look at these existential aspects, largely

determine the functionality of dysfunctionality in the daily life (Yalom, 2012). From an existential point of view any experience is seen as an opportunity for growth and personal development. Existential psychotherapy represents a dynamic approach of life experiences and it adapts to needs, values and wishes of each individual by reaching topics such as freedom, responsibility, will and existential isolation, human values, creativity, love, self-awareness, human potential, etc. (Yalom, 2012).

On the other hand, CBT, developed by Aaron T. Beck and derived from the behavioral experiments conducted by Pavlov, Skinner and others, claims that the actions of an individual represent reactions and interpretations to the environment, which manifest through a series of cognitive, affective, behavioral and motivational factors (Corsini & Wedding, 2008, as cited in Elkins, 2012). CBT represents a direct intervention form, centered on the symptom. It resembles the medical way of approaching certain affections: the affection is differentiated, a diagnostic is made and then an intervention plan is created, centered on objectives.

This form of therapy outlined around the idea that between an event and the emotional interpretation that a person has related to that event there is a strong correlation. In other words, the event is neutral as long as an individual has no subjective opinions about it (Beck 1976; Beck et al 1979). For example, a person who is suffering from panic attacks when is at school, will start fearing these reactions because are perceived as dangerous: the person believes that a cerebral or a heart stroke will occur, or even death. In other words, the panic attack is interpreted as dangerous, fact that can lead to non-adaptive behaviors such as avoiding places where these reactions appear. CBT emphasizes behaviors, thoughts, emotions, somatic reaction and in which way these reactions were learned in the past and are maintained in the present.

Considering all of the above, questions like: “In which point can these two therapeutic forms meet?”, “How useful is blending a humanist method with a strategic one?” This paper will try to answer these questions in the following lines.

II. WHERE THESE TWO APPROACHES MEET

The humanist approach took form in the years 1950-1960, following the development of the humanist ideological school, started by authors like Carl Rogers, Rollo May and Gordon Allport, as a form of protest to the behavioral (experimental) psychology and psychoanalysis, which, in the vision of the authors named above, did not take into consideration the human side

of the individuals. Later, combining philosophy, branches of the humanist psychology and psychoanalysis, but also writings of authors like Dostoievski, Camus, Kafka, Tolstoi and others, the existential approach took form (Yalom, 2012). It does not call for instruments and tests, but resumes itself to the needs of the client to find solutions to the fundamental problems he is facing. As contrast, CBT uses instruments of measurement and clear problem solving strategies.

However, the two form of therapy have common points. Centering on the “here and now” and the exploration of the present experience of the client represent central parts in both forms of therapy. The active using of empathy and carefully listening the client’s exposures are some of the elements that make common ground with both therapeutic forms. The focus is on “what” and “how” and it doesn’t explore deeply the causes of a disorder, as is the case of psychoanalysis, although some reasons behind the client’s condition can become clear during the therapeutic process (Langdridge, 2010).

Both forms of therapy use reason and phenomenological approach, don’t explore contents of the unconscious, they use experiential techniques and they prepare the individual for the future (Prasko et al., 2012)

As far as it concerns the therapeutic relationship, even though it represents a major critique point addressed to the CBT, the method of working centered on objectives represents the content of therapy, and the accent is on creating an authentic relationship with the client in order for the process to be successful. The perception of the client on the therapeutic relationship it also depends on the outcome and the results of the therapeutic process, not only the other way around (Leahy, 2008).

In existential psychotherapy, the content and the process are two major aspects of the therapeutic speech: the content represents what the client is transmitting, the exposures and the words he is using, and the process refers to the interpersonal relationship between the client and the therapist. The nature of the relationship between the therapist and the patient affects every therapy session and depends on the sensibility that the therapist has towards existential issues (Yalom, 2011).

III. THE POTENTIAL OF USING THEM TOGETHER

There are researches and papers that explore the integration of the existential component in group psychotherapy related with critical life issues or in cases of patients that suffer from terminal illnesses. These complementary models of offering support in the therapeutic process turned out to be beneficial in that they encourage patients to confront the most profound fears, death related anxiety, finding a meaning in their life experience and exposing them to other

peoples' life experiences, experiences that resemble theirs (Kissane et al., 1997; Kissane et al., 2004; Chochinov et al., 2005).

There are a series of strategies used in CBT through which, integration of the existential component could be enhanced and would have the capacity of bringing more benefits.

As an existential theme, in the identity development process (starting in teen-hood and continuing in adult life) it takes place the development, the adaptation and the clarification of individual's values. This process can be accompanied by anxiety, depression and restlessness. CBT offers useful techniques to integrate and explore this process in a safe environment in which the motivation and personal characteristics can be explored (Prasko et al., 2012).

Another aspect in which the two forms of psychotherapy can work together is the technique of cognitive restructuring. This technique is used in CBT to set aside the blockades of self-actualization and individual development and to help adopting some adaptive answers to the surrounding environment. This technique doesn't have just one cognitive component, or, better say the cognitive component alone doesn't offer adaptability. Growth of awareness on self and on the outside world can bring a plus in the success that using this technique can bring (ibidem).

Using the mindfulness technique, the base awareness meditation can have also an important role in treating clients and can serve as a common point between existential therapy and CBT. This type of meditation, often used in cognitive behavioral therapies, requires the individual to look at his own thoughts and feelings from outside, in a detached way, in a non-evaluative manner. This process strengthens the process of centering towards the interior, amplifying the awareness of some existential aspects. Also, through the elevated level of awareness in the mindfulness technique, the patient can bestow upon himself the personal responsibility through which he realizes that he is the one who administers his own emotional state but also the feeling of personal integrity, in which the individual becomes in agreement with himself and with his own convictions, feelings and value systems (Brown et al., 2007).

A last aspect in which exploring from the two perspective offered by CBT and existential psychotherapy can be beneficial is represented by the theme of mortality. As an existential aspect, the anguish of death is amongst the first states felt with the awareness of being. This anguish is present relatively often in therapy and can have masked forms. The manifestation of this fear is most often indirect, through general restlessness or masked by other psychological symptoms. Sometimes though, it can be so present that overwhelms any other feeling of joy or fulfillment (Yalom, 2011).

Death related anxiety is present in many cases of anxiety (phobias, panic attacks, agoraphobia) met in psychotherapy. There is research on this matter from the cognitive behavioral perspective (Furer, Walker, Chartier, & Stein, 1997; Furer et al., 2007) which points

to the fact that the subject of death appears frequently amongst patients with anxiety, and the resolving strategies can be similar with the ones used in other anxiety forms. The clinical cases described in the writings of Irvin Yalon, and other researches, bring out the idea that the existential approach has beneficial results in understanding and reducing the death anguish (Yalom, 2011, 2012, 2015; Breitbart et al., 2015). Thus, using some concepts from existential psychotherapy on these profound fears and exploring it in depth alongside anxiety reduction techniques used in CBT can be successful in diminishing death related fears.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Psychotherapy is an exploratory process of the human mind and emotions used to restore or acquire the balance needed for a good and fulfilling functioning of the individual in his environment. Some of the strongest instruments that a psychotherapist can have in this exploratory initiative are curiosity and imagination, which allows him to meet the client and to generate new means and ways to solve problems.

The cognitive behavioral therapy proved its efficiency countless times in studies and clinical research (Dobson, 1989; Borkovec & Costello, 1993; Hofmann et al., 2012). Existential psychotherapy is one of the dynamic approaches of psychotherapy and is centered on the fundamentally rooted worries in the human existence. While the existential approach explored the human fundamentals, the cognitive behavioral therapy helps the client to relate thoughts and behaviors and understand how these influence the way he feels.

The eclectic approach in psychotherapy (combining the two therapeutic perspectives or using techniques common to both approaches) is possible and useful through a comprehensive system which includes not only the theory and base principles, but also specific techniques. It is encouraged to assimilate as much information as possible about the functioning of the psychic and human body and an opening towards the clients problems which may include themes as: sexuality, LGTB, divorce, death, anxiety, isolation, freedom, responsibility, etc. (Patterson, 1989; Beutler, Consoli & Lane, 2005).

The job of a psychotherapist involves, besides a continuous and rigorous training and an open mind, a great moral and ethical responsibility towards the client. Because of this, it is preferably to be ready for any kind of problem an individual can encounter.

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