

EXISTENTIAL THERAPY

1. Introduction to Existential Therapy

Existential Therapy is a psychological approach that focuses on human existence, freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in life. It is influenced by existential philosophy and emphasizes that individuals must create their own meaning and purpose despite life's uncertainties.

This approach emerged from the ideas of philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and psychologists like Viktor Frankl and Rollo May.

Existential therapy helps individuals confront important life questions such as:

- What is the meaning of my life?
- How do my choices shape who I become?
- How do I deal with anxiety, suffering, and death?

The therapist does not provide direct solutions but guides clients to explore their own values, choices, and responsibilities.

Kenyan Example: A university student in Nairobi feels pressured by family expectations to study medicine but personally wants to pursue art. In existential therapy, the therapist helps the student explore their personal values, freedom of choice, and responsibility for shaping their future.

2. Existential Therapy View of Human Nature

Existential therapy views human beings as:

- **Free and capable of making choices**
- **Responsible for their actions**
- **Searching for meaning in life**
- **Aware of their mortality**

Human beings are not seen as controlled only by past experiences or unconscious drives. Instead, they actively create themselves through decisions and actions.

Existential therapy also recognizes that humans experience **existential anxiety**, which comes from confronting realities such as freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death.

Kenyan Example: A young professional in Mombasa may feel anxiety about whether to remain in a stable job or start a business. Existential therapy views this anxiety as a normal response to freedom and responsibility rather than as a disorder.

3. Key Concepts of Existential Therapy

a) Freedom and Responsibility

Individuals are free to make choices but must also accept responsibility for the consequences.

Kenyan Example: A graduate in Kisumu chooses to relocate for better job opportunities. While the decision may bring success, they must also take responsibility for leaving family and adapting to a new environment.

b) Meaning and Purpose

People constantly search for meaning in their lives.

Kenyan Example: A teacher working in rural Turkana County finds purpose in educating children despite difficult working conditions.

c) Existential Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural response to life's uncertainties and major life decisions.

Kenyan Example: A farmer in Machakos County may feel anxiety due to unpredictable weather affecting crops and livelihood.

d) Isolation

Humans ultimately face life individually despite social connections.

Kenyan Example: A migrant worker moving from Eldoret to Nairobi for employment may experience loneliness while adjusting to city life.

e) Awareness of Death

Understanding that life is limited can motivate individuals to live more meaningful lives.

Kenyan Example: After losing a family member, a person in Nakuru may start prioritizing relationships and meaningful experiences.

4. Goals of Existential Therapy

The main goals of existential therapy include:

- Helping clients **become aware of their freedom to choose**
- Encouraging individuals to **accept responsibility for their lives**
- Assisting clients in **finding meaning and purpose**
- Helping individuals **cope with anxiety and life uncertainties**
- Promoting **authentic living**

The therapist supports clients in exploring their experiences rather than giving direct advice.

Kenyan Example: A youth facing unemployment in Nairobi may feel hopeless. Existential therapy helps them reflect on personal strengths, choices, and new directions such as entrepreneurship or further education.

5. Techniques Used in Existential Therapy

Unlike many other therapies, existential therapy does not rely on rigid techniques. Instead, it focuses on dialogue and exploration.

a) Self-Exploration

Clients explore their beliefs, fears, and values.

Kenyan Example: A university student at University of Nairobi explores personal identity and future goals with a counselor.

b) Reflective Dialogue

Therapists engage clients in deep discussions about life experiences.

Kenyan Example: A young adult discussing career uncertainty with a counselor in Nairobi reflects on their passions and aspirations.

c) Confronting Avoidance

Clients are encouraged to face difficult truths rather than avoid them.

Kenyan Example: A person avoiding conversations about family conflict learns to confront and address the issue.

d) Meaning-Centered Exploration

Clients examine how their life experiences can create meaning.

Kenyan Example: A community volunteer in Kibera finds purpose in helping disadvantaged youth.

6. Application of Existential Therapy

Existential therapy can be applied in many areas such as:

- **Mental health counseling**
- **Career guidance**
- **Grief counseling**
- **Personal development**
- **Youth empowerment programs**

It is particularly useful when individuals face major life transitions or existential crises.

Kenyan Example: After losing employment due to economic changes, a worker in Nairobi seeks counseling to redefine career goals and life meaning.

7. Conclusion

Existential therapy focuses on helping individuals understand their freedom, responsibility, and ability to create meaning in life. It encourages people to confront life's uncertainties, accept responsibility for their choices, and live authentically.

By exploring personal values and life experiences, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and lead more purposeful lives.

Kenyan Example: A young entrepreneur starting a business in Nairobi may face uncertainty and fear of failure. Through existential reflection, they learn to accept risk, take responsibility for decisions, and find meaning in pursuing their ambitions.