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Existential Crisis: A pluralistic response

John Hills

(2500 words)

Introduction

We reach significant turning points in our lives which might be described as ‘existential crises’¹ where stark realities come into the foreground of our experience. We might experience a wondering about why I am living this specific life and not others: Why this partner? Why this place? Why these friends? Why this job? (Or more generally: What the hell am I doing?) It may involve a questioning of the meaning of things: why does this matter, why should I care? It may also involve an acute awareness that I am and/or the people I love are going to die. Often at these points we might seek out psychotherapy. However there are diverse routes through which client and therapist might work collaboratively to turn into and reflect upon existential experience. Moreover our clients will uncover different strategies through which to re-realise connection and continuity. As such, here a pluralistic approach^{2,3} to responding to existential crises is advocated. Whilst existentialism may be thought of as a middle class concern, for those of us with the luxury to ponder upon such things, nonetheless in this article I’m going to advance the idea that we are all confronted with the same perennial conditions of life – which I identify here as impermanence and incompleteness.

Impermanence and Incompleteness

In his essay ‘On Transience’ Freud⁴ recalled a summer walk with a poet through the countryside; flora and fauna in full bloom. The poet was mournful, not able to enjoy that moment for the knowledge that everything there, just as all nature, art, beauty and civilisation, would one day perish. Freud countered that the finitude of things made their transient beauty all the more precious and meaningful:

‘A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely’⁵

Impermanence is the idea that everything, everywhere is forever in flux; ever changing. No state of affairs will go on unchanged – whether a personal experience of happiness and actualisation, a relationship that seems to answer all our questions, a home we’ve worked so hard to maintain, or indeed life itself. This too shall pass. We know impermanence when we cling on all the tighter to those we love, knowing that one day one of us will die. Impermanence is implicit in the first of Yalom’s⁶ Four Givens – the inevitability of death. As Yalom observed:

‘Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct’⁷.

Impermanence sits at the heart of Buddhist thinking too. These words from Sogyal Rinpoche in the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying speak to its permeating of all life:

‘Every time I hear the rush of a mountain stream, or the waves crashing on the shore, or my own heartbeat, I hear the sound of impermanence. These changes, these small deaths, are our living links with death. They are death’s pulse, death’s heartbeat, prompting us to let go of all the things we cling to.’⁸

Parallel and intimately related to impermanence is a perennial sense of incompleteness. By incompleteness I mean that aside from transient moments where our lives feel complete, these moments are always on their way to somewhere else, and as such that our lives are ordinarily experienced as incomplete. The way I think of incompleteness is to think of a cyclical pattern, like a physics textbook diagram of the swinging of a pendulum, or a little pocket book of tide times, such as would be useful to a local fishing community. At what point within the cycle is the cycle complete? Any point in the cycle is always on its way to somewhere else. Likewise when is a family complete? New members are ever joining, transitioning and leaving. And at which time in my life was I living the life I was born to live? Moments of satisfaction are typically followed by an ‘OK what next?’ orientation. Or even, that a moment of apparent completion feels empty and dissatisfying when arrived at. I am reminded of the Peggy Lee song ‘Is That All There Is’, which speaks to repeated experiences of disillusionment with life. There’s more fun in the song than I’m making it sound here, and Lee’s consolation comes through in the chorus line: ‘If that’s all there is my friends, then let’s keep dancing’.

I think we also experience that sense of incompleteness where we become aware that with every choice we make we exclude the possibility of other lives we might have lived. This might be about the place we live or the people in our lives. We have a taste of this feeling too knowing that there is not enough time in one lifetime to read every book, or travel to every place, one would wish to. The reality is that to pursue this certain life we let some of our potentials wither on the vine, but they linger like phantom limbs in the internal concept of self.

Expressing these ideas matters because it reframes instances of dissatisfaction, disillusionment, loneliness or meaninglessness. These may not be indicators that something has gone wrong psychologically or socially, but rather they might be seen as impermanence working within and between us; natural and true. There is hope where we can respond to those feelings as a calling towards reconnection and renewal.

Existential crisis

We therapists may meet with our clients in a state of existential crisis – moments when it feels like the veil has been lifted to expose a cold, painful, or absurd reality. Martin Adams⁹ observed that ‘clients come to us when they feel their autobiography is not making enough sense, or has ceased to make enough sense.’ Our clients might arrive with a feeling that they have plateaued or otherwise with a disappointment with what they have. They may report a senselessness: “why should I care?” or “what is the point of any of this if we’re all going to die?”.

Berra¹⁰ identified some of the symptoms of an existential depression as insomnia, boredom and hopelessness. However from the inside an existential crisis may be experienced as ‘an excruciating state of suspension in the void, in the total absence of any certainty [...] a painful and perilous state of emptiness and suffering, not easily tolerable’¹¹.

The therapist's response, as far as Yalom¹² is concerned, is relatively straightforward: our clients are challenged to discover their own wisdom; their own intuitions about the meaning of life. Importantly however, according to Bugental¹ the 'growth alternative' to an existential crisis necessitated a 'leap in the dark' – into territories previously unknown and uncharted by the client. This theme appears to be taken up by contemporary theorists informed from a dynamic systems perspective that identify the client's experience of novelty as a crucial ingredient in therapeutic change^{13, 14}.

Avoidance

However, a core therapeutic aspect of a person's presentation may be the ways in which they are avoiding confronting the existential realities of their lives. Some examples of these styles of avoidance include:

- Coasting (passively going along with life, others' agendas)
- Self-sabotage e.g. procrastination, mindless habits, debt
- Addictive behaviours e.g. alcohol, exercise, shopping, video games
- Symbolic means of taking control e.g. self-harm, restrictive eating

And some which might be experienced keenly in the therapeutic space:

- Grievance and victimisation (externalisation of the problem)
- Lurching from one drama to the next
- Pretend mode – the client appears to be reflecting but nothing vital is being reflected upon

These patterns may also, of course, be presented by traumatised clients, and depending on the person it may be more appropriate to think of trauma than to think of existential crisis. My therapeutic response to encountering these patterns is to gently observe them as taking place, either within the session, or within the client's reports, and be curious about when these patterns seem to become super-charged. I would enquire either implicitly or explicitly about what may be being hidden or obscured by these patterns. Within an accepting and trusting therapeutic relationship, this tends to enable us to start to make contact with the core concern.

A pluralist response

Paul Wong¹⁵ argues that since existential psychology is concerned with human existence it is relevant to all people, and therefore recommends existential competencies for all psychotherapists. Wong advocates therapy which is pluralistic in nature, departing from psychology's 'tribal or silo mentality' instead emphasising the importance of collaboration, and drawing from the wisdom of diverse psychologies. As a pluralistic therapist, there are some core therapeutic dynamics which I have found essential to working existentially. These include:

- Therapeutic exposure¹⁶. Our clients being able to recognise and confront that which they're afraid of in an accepting and containing therapeutic space. This may also involve exposure to the therapist's relative existential clarity.
- 'Towards and away' observations within session¹⁷, e.g. "I saw you light up when you spoke about that" or "I feel like we're not quite connecting just now" often mirrored by the client's towards and away moves out there in the world. This can help to uncover and work with potential experience avoidance.
- The metatherapeutic current¹⁸, the parallel reflective thread between client and therapist which is concerned with the nature of the therapy itself: what our purpose is, where we're heading, and how we get there. This can help the client to feel they have ownership and responsibility in the therapeutic work.

Three psychological processes

Here are three psychological processes which I have found frequently come into play working existentially:

1) Making active decisions rather than passive ones

Where clients appear to be coasting along or otherwise living inauthentically, they may come to recognise the idea that they have made passive decisions about their lives. A helpful therapeutic approach might be to model to the client their own free will vs a sense of fatalism. We can often feel paralysed by the burden of making decisions, when either 'path' seems fraught with pitfalls and dangers. So sometimes it can be helpful to model the principle that the decision being made, it's then one's own responsibility to make it work. Therapeutic activities might include helping the client to identify their values, and to consider what committed action in the service of those values might look like¹⁹. Indices of change might include the client's clarity about their own needs and wishes, purposeful action and a greater sense of control.

2) Acceptance of our 'unacceptable' parts

Sometimes clients might report the occasional appearance 'out of character' behaviours. Otherwise they might present with shame, even the experience of living a 'double life': "If only they knew what I was really like...". The concealment of the shame is typically exhausting work. A helpful therapeutic approach might be to introduce the idea of parts e.g. "it sounds as though a part of you feels... whilst another part..." Attempting to identify the good intent of the different parts, even those that originally seem rotten, can help towards acceptance of multiplicity. Therapeutic activities might include encouraging the client to name and personify their different parts. Perhaps there is motto that a part lives by. Perhaps dialogue is possible between the parts. Indices of change might include a greater awareness and acceptance of different parts, and in that, sometimes a sense of greater freedom and physical lightness.

3) Empathy for self and others

Here I mean an empathy particularly informed by 'our ultimate aloneness', another of Yalom's Four Givens⁶. We locate ourselves as someone seeking connection in relation to others. Clients might present with avoidant behaviours; with the objectification of others, or misunderstanding others'

intent, or even egocentrism. It can be helpful sometimes to model the idea that we each seek connection in our own diverse ways, which might be akin to 'love languages'²⁰. Therapeutic activities might include diarying or writing exercises; a decentred curiosity about how a situation might be experienced by others; narrative and constructivist approaches; or creative representations of self, others, and world. Indices of change might include the client making more "I" statements rather than "you" or "they" statements, more realistic expectations of self and others, greater compassion, and the discovery of new strategies of connection and continuity.

Strategies of connection and continuity

My thesis therefore is that we seek to sublimate our experiences of impermanence and incompleteness through connection and continuity, and that there are a plurality of strategies through which we re-realise connection and continuity. I see these as falling into four general families:

1) Attachment to life

Reconnection might mean a renewed commitment to healthy living; it might mean clarity in our career, or doing work more personally meaningful. The attachment to life might mean reconnection and renewal in one's core relationship(s), fighting for a cause in the time that we have, or otherwise about a devotion to some form of creativity.

2) A stake in the world beyond one's lifespan

Continuity might be achieved biologically, through the children that we have, nephews or nieces that we support, or as teachers in the footholds we create for our students. It might mean a conscious modulation of an intergenerational legacy: repeating in this generation the positive ways in which we were parented, and resolving to do other things differently. It might mean a sense of connection with ancestors and descendants through the generational continuum. It might mean commitment to a certain traditional life that we wish to keep alive in our generation and pass onto the next. Alternatively continuity might be experienced through the good works that we perform that become a legacy which survives us. It might also simply mean making sure those we love know they're loved before we are parted.

3) Supernatural perspectives

We may also sublimate our existential experience into a religious faith, which might include for example a personal relationship with God, or with spirits, and a belief in afterlife, whether a destination such as heaven or a belief in reincarnation. Others may assume a more pantheistic attitude towards the world; they may take their lead from 'the universe' and apparently meaningful synchronicities.

4) Embracing impermanence

Finally we might embrace the impermanence of all things, finding meaning in a non-attachment to people and situations, whilst remaining loving and compassionate in that non-attachment, or otherwise expressing ongoing gratitude for the world just as it is. It might mean a sense of communion with an Eternal Now, and it might mean a sense of homecoming as one returns to the same elemental and recurrent nature that we were born into.

Of course it isn't for us therapists to determine which of these strategies is the 'correct' one for our clients. The strategy in any case typically feels more discovery than design. However the therapist may continue to offer wonderings about how well, or otherwise, a strategy enables a client to re-realise connection within the totality of their life. In this way the existential crisis may pass on like a storm that rains itself out, as the person emerges into reconnection and renewal.

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