



Region One ESC Counseling and Mental Health Department

Existentialism in Counseling

Existence Precedes Essence

Foundations, Core Concepts, and
Practical Applications

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What is Existentialism?

- A philosophical approach focused on human existence and meaning
 - Emphasizes personal responsibility and freedom of choice
 - Concerned with how individuals experience life
- What does “Existence precedes Essence” mean to you?

Historical Foundations

- Rooted in European philosophy
 - Key philosophers: Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche
 - Later influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger
- Applied philosophy rather than a technique-driven model
 - Focuses on the client's lived experience
 - Therapeutic relationship is central

Core Assumptions

- Humans are free and responsible for their choices
 - Life involves uncertainty and anxiety
 - Meaning is not given; it is created

Key Concepts

- Freedom and responsibility
 - Freedom to choose (I must own my choices)
 - Freedom to create meaning (I live with the outcome)
 - Freedom to define myself (I act consistently)
 - Freedom to change (I am accountable)
 - Existential anxiety (ex. Who are we?)
 - Authenticity

The Four Existential Givens

- Death: Awareness of mortality
- Freedom: Responsibility for choices
- Isolation: Ultimate aloneness
- Meaninglessness: Search for purpose

Role of the Counselor

- Acts as a genuine, authentic presence
- Helps clients explore values and choices
- Encourages self-awareness and responsibility

Role of the Client

- Actively explores personal meaning
- Reflects on choices and consequences
- Takes ownership of life direction

Existentialism in Schools and Common Techniques

- Here-and-now dialogue
- Phenomenological exploration
- Use of silence and reflection
- Supports identity development
- Helps students explore values and goals
- Useful during transitions and decision-making

Key Existential Concepts — Translated for Children

Freedom: “You get to make choices.”


Responsibility: “Your choices belong to you.”

Anxiety: “Worried feelings show something matters.”

Meaning: “What feels important to you?”

Isolation: “Sometimes we feel alone, even with others.”

Death: “Some things change and don’t come back.”

A woman with long brown hair and bangs, wearing a beige blazer over a white top and matching beige pants, is sitting on a light-colored sofa. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a modern, minimalist living room with a large window on the left, a potted plant, and a dark console table with decorative items on the right.

Existential Therapy for Kids

school counselors, it's a powerful way to



Strengths of Existential Counseling

- Highly flexible and individualized
- Addresses deep life concerns
- Promotes long-term personal growth

Limitations

- May feel abstract for some clients
- Less structured than other approaches
- Requires strong counselor self-awareness

Counselor Approaches to Different Age Groups

Elementary

- Be fully present (more than directive)
- Normalize feelings without fixing them
- Use play and stories as meaning-making tools
- Support choice to build ownership
- Help children name what matters to them

Middle School

- Normalize confusion and uncertainty
- Use existential curiosity over interrogation style
- Reframe anxiety and mood
- Support choice within limits

High School

- Name existential anxiety explicitly
- Explore values over outcomes
- Emphasize responsibility without blame
- Address meaningless and apathy
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Summary

- Existential counseling focuses on meaning and choice
- Emphasizes authenticity and responsibility

[Kahoot!](#)