



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.”



Hey  
Gen

# 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 meaninglessness and apathy
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# Summary

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

[Kahoot!](#)