

**A BAKER'S DOZEN:
PROPOSED THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS
OF AN EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC PSYCHOTHERAPIST**

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I have been a member of AHP since 1973, and an existential-humanistic therapist since 1975. Over the years, I've been continuously fascinated by both how and why Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy works. Part of my search has included attempting to define therapeutic interventions that are specifically beneficial for an existential-humanistic therapist to utilize. Below are my thoughts.

I want to acknowledge the influence of Jim Bugental, Ph.D., my mentor and friend, who emphasized a number of these interventions.

Philosophical Interventions

1. Being versus Doing

In existential-humanistic psychotherapy, the being drives the therapy - not the doing. The doing is secondary, it is the result of what emerges from your being. This is in contrast to doing-based therapies, wherein you have a goal and methods to get to that goal, so once you hear the problem you go to the predetermined methodologies.

Your intention is to let your interventions stem from your being. You don't come into the session with preconceived ideas that you will absolutely hold on to. While you will most likely have a flow of thoughts and feelings about your client, your relationship with your client, and the course of therapy, there is no rigid grip to any of it.

Rather, what is present for you is a sense of stillness, silence, and just being... being with what is going on internally with your client, being with what is going on internally within you, and being with what is going on in your relationship with your client. Your interventions come from your intuitive sense of what you need to say or do, or not say or not do - right here, right now, in the moment.

In the course of therapy, you are modeling for your client what it means to come from your being. You are also facilitating your client and allowing her thoughts, feelings, and actions to emerge from her being, and to experience what that means.

2. Holding the Container

Holding the container is one of the primary tasks that you provide for your client. This means that you want your client to have a sense of confidence that whatever he expresses in the session, you can handle it - and he knows it.

You hold the container so your client can risk exploring material that is uncomfortable for him to explore, and also possibly unusual for him to explore. You are encouraging him to share what is present, and communicating to him in your words and actions that you are fully with him in whatever he is sharing - whether it is deep hurt, rage, shame, joy, etc.

Whatever his sharing evokes in you, you will handle it in service to his therapeutic goals - sometimes sharing your experience with him, and sometimes not, depending on what would be therapeutically beneficial in that moment. He experiences your internal strength and ability to handle strong emotions and difficult material, and knows he doesn't have to take care of you. You are the anchor for him.

In order to hold the container strongly, it is important to do your own personal work. This would include committing to your own psychotherapy, engaging in paid and/or peer supervision or consultation, and investing in self-care throughout your career. Doing your personal work allows you to know and renew yourself, continuously. Doing your personal work reinforces your resilience, which makes you more capable of being with whatever material is presented to you by your clients.

3. Process versus Content

Process over content is emphasized, although content certainly is not to be ignored.

Process means paying attention to how your client is with herself in the session and/or how she is with you in your relationship. For example, in paying attention to how your client is with herself - you may be aware she qualifies her statements frequently (maybe, I think, etc.), or she is emotionally repetitive without resolving issues or releasing emotion, or she is rational around content that you would expect to evoke strong feelings. In paying attention to how she is with you in your relationship - you may be aware you experience her as seeking your approval, or being argumentative with you. At times it may be important to express your awarenesses directly to her, whether it is focusing on her relationship to herself (intrapsychic process) and/or her relationship to you (interpersonal process).

You can proceed with this process orientation in one of two ways. One approach would be to facilitate your client's attention toward her inner life in the moment. For example, you point out her tentativeness in the session and encourage her to free associate about what comes up for her in relationship to her tentativeness in how she lives her life. This could include past associations and/or future concerns about how her tentativeness impacts her life. Ultimately, you are supporting her to explore her tentativeness in relationship to her self and world constructs - how she has defined who she is and what her world is. In the exploration of her tentativeness she may discover that she believes the world is dangerous, people are out to get her, and that she is fragile, vulnerable, and needs to hide to keep from getting hurt. With more conscious awareness and repeated exploration of this existential theme, her self and world constructs can be modified so that she can make different choices that are more authentic to who she is now - which could support her in being more self-actualizing and more fulfilled.

The second process direction you could take is to facilitate a dialogue to explore the interpersonal relationship between you and your client. For example, you could explore how her tentativeness is happening right now between the two of you, and what that means for both of you. For example, as she explores her concern that you won't like her if she is too assertive, you can let her know that actually you appreciate her being assertive - and that her tentativeness can be off-putting to you. She may then become aware that her tentativeness may also be off-putting to other people, and that her dad was pleased when she was passive and irritated when she was assertive. Your feedback facilitates a new self-awareness, which she can use to re-evaluate how she wants to be, both inside herself and in the world at large. With more conscious awareness and repeated interactions exploring this existential theme of tentativeness between you, her self and world constructs can be modified so that she can make different choices that are more authentic to who she is now - which will support her in being more self-actualizing and more fulfilled.

Whether you work with your clients' process in the here and now intrapsychically or interpersonally, you can get to the same end - supporting your client to be more authentic and self-actualized, two primary goals of existential-humanistic therapy.

4. Everything Is Everything

You work from the premise that everything is everything. There is no such thing as a coincidence. Rather, there is a synchronicity in living. Thus what happens in the therapy sessions usually isn't an

isolated incident. It's assumed that the client's way of being that is demonstrated in the session also occurs in his other relationships and in the way he lives his life.

For example, if he arrives late for his sessions repeatedly, you could assume that he is late for other appointments in the rest of his life. You can check this out with him at an appropriate time. If it is a repetition of being late in general, you want to explore with him his thoughts and feelings about this way of being, what meaning he makes of it, would he like to change it, etc. Thus the lateness in the session is an opening for a much broader and deeper exploration for how he lives his life.

While I believe this to be the exception, his lateness for sessions could be an isolated incident in which he is late for therapy but on time in the rest of his life. In that case, you can explore with him how he feels about being late for his session, how he feels the lateness impacts your relationship, and what the meaning of his lateness is as he sees it. The exploration of his lateness can still lead to everything is everything. For example, his lateness to sessions could be that he is afraid of your opinion of him because he sees you as an authority figure, which can then lead to an exploration of how he sees therapists as authority figures and/or how he was afraid of his parents, who he experienced as being very authoritative.

It is important to not assume that any action or interaction is an isolated event, apart from the rest of the client's life and how he lives his life. Assuming everything is everything provides a lot of meaningful therapeutic grist for the mill.

5. Inclusion, Not Amputation

Everything takes place in the present moment - our past is embedded in the present, and our future unfolds from it. Therefore, as much as possible, you will want to be aware of everything going on with your client, within yourself, and between you and your client. As appropriate, you may want to explore your awarenesses with your client.

For example, in the first phone contact you are aware if the client's tone is primarily tentative, matter of fact, dismissive, enthusiastic, or ingratiating in her presentation of why she wants to initiate therapy. While you won't give her feedback about her tone during that first contact, you will give her feedback about her tone at some point - whether it is in the first session, the 15th session, or the 50th session - and you may give this feedback repeatedly as the tone occurs in the sessions. Your feedback allows her to see how she presents herself - which she may be only semi-conscious of, or not conscious of at all. This feedback allows her to experience more fully a way she is being in the world, and in exploring that, she will discover more of her unconscious material, which can then be further grist for the therapeutic mill.

Another example would be if you constantly feel sleepy when working with your client - rather than avoiding that awareness you may want to let her know, and then explore it with her. How does she feel about you getting sleepy? Does your sleepiness point to a lack of presence that occurs in her life in general? And/or does your sleepiness point to something she evokes in you that makes you want to check out? If so, could it be some aspect of your countertransference that you may need to explore and work out with your client?

Relationship Interventions

6. Alliance and Context

You pay attention to the state of the alliance with your client and to the context in which the client is expressing his concerns.

Alliance refers to the level of trust you and your client have with each other. As you are working with your client, monitor the state of the alliance you have with him. This will help determine your interventions.

Alliance is established and deepened over time. Your interventions will be different if you have been working with a client for a year than they will be if this is your first session together. In your first session you will primarily be listening to your client's story. After a year of working with him, you will have a range of interventions, from supportive to challenging. Even when you have been working with him for a year, you will still want to monitor the level of trust established, the depth of inward searching he is exhibiting, and the depth of connection you have with him to determine your interventions.

For example, if your relationship with a vulnerable client is primarily a nurturing one, you may be gentler in your challenging of him than you would be with a client who likes to challenge you more in the sessions. You match the client where they are. However, there also may be times when you want to do the opposite. For example, with a client who needs a lot of validation, you may challenge him - and then process his experience of being challenged. With a client that is often oppositional, you may validate him and then process his experience of being validated.

Context refers to the circumstances surrounding the client's concerns. As you are working with your client, be aware of the context of what he is bringing to the session. For instance, if he is agitated, you will want to understand the context of the agitation before intervening. Is this agitation the result of a disagreement with his boss the day before? If that is the case, it may be useful to encourage him to vent and process his feelings. Or is it a repeated way of being for him? If that is the case, it may be good to point that out to him and explore his need to agitate himself. Or is the agitation a coming apart at the seams for him? If that is the case, you may want to treat him supportively and firmly, aiming to keep him from unraveling - perhaps reminding him of his ego strength and his ability to not succumb so much to his upset.

7. Emphasis on Intention and/or Resistance

You are aware that with just about anything a client says or does, you can focus on the intention toward wholeness, or you can focus on the resistance to wholeness. You will emphasize either one, both, or go back and forth depending on what is therapeutically optimal.

For example, if your client focuses on her hypochondria, you can focus on how that keeps her from engaging in life in more productive ways, and explore all that goes on inside her around her living a more inhibited life. Or, you could point out the strength she demonstrates in tenaciously focusing on her health concerns, and explore what would happen if she used that strength in more productive ways. How would she be and what would her life and world look like? Does she experience her own strength and can she describe her strength to you?

Another example would be if your client is achievement-oriented, and she shares an achievement with you. You can focus on the celebration and joy of that achievement, or you can focus on how she may be overidentified with that achievement - and her achievements in general. The exploration of her overidentification with her achievements may allow her to see the price she pays - she can end up pushing people away with her self-focus and/or she can feel insecure if she is not achieving. Or, you can explore both the intention and resistance aspects of her words and actions.

8. Emphasis on Transparency/Authenticity versus Transference/Countertransference

Transparency and authenticity are key components in facilitating the growth and healing of your client. Therapist transparency and authenticity requires that you allow yourself to be real and to be seen as a person - within the context of the therapeutic relationship, in support of the client's goals. Your intention

is to be open, honest, direct, and clear with your client - and to be therapeutically appropriate in terms of when and how you express yourself.

Therapist transparency and authenticity includes sharing your perceptions of what is going on with your client as well as sharing what feelings are evoked in you in relationship with your client. For example, it could include sharing how you experience your client as being detached, and that you feel like you're not making strong contact with him. It could include sharing your experience that you care for your client. It could include expressing your appreciation for the courage it takes for him to stay with his concerns. It could include sharing your frustration at his stuckness and/or your own stuckness in discovering what can mobilize him. It could include sharing some identification you have with his concerns and perhaps sharing a story from your own life, past or present, to demonstrate that he is not alone in his concerns as you have been there within your own life, too.

The belief is that the experience of an authentic relationship can be transformative, and that your transparency is one important way to facilitate and engage authentically with your client. In the context of an authentic engagement, your client can discover a deeper and more positive level of connection - with you, with himself, and with others. Even if the relationship is challenging at times, it can be rewarding for him to experience how conflict can be worked through and how differences can be accepted positively.

Transference and countertransference need to be explored within the context of the transparency and authenticity established in the therapeutic relationship.

Transference may arise in terms of your client not seeing who you are and not taking in what you are communicating because he is projecting past relationships on to you. For example, he may share that he feels ashamed that he is not very intelligent. Even though you express your compassion for him, somehow he feels you are judging him as not being too bright. In his exploration of feeling judged, he eventually comes to understand that in fact you do value his intelligence, and that his expectation that everyone looks at him as not being intelligent has kept him from taking in your verbal and non-verbal validation. He may also be more open to the possibility that he is more intelligent than he'd been giving himself credit for.

Countertransference may arise in terms of you not seeing your client for who he is, and not taking in what he is communicating because you are projecting your past relationships on to him. For example, he may express criticism about your abruptness in the session, which could trigger your resentment... How could he be critical after all the work you have done with him? As you do your own inward searching and get some more feedback from him, you realize that you are overreacting. You realize a link to your relationship with your dad... and how you would become impatient with him and defensive around his criticism toward you. You realize you have not completely worked through your resentments towards your dad, and that you put a bigger charge on your client's criticism than was merited. You can then share your overreaction with him, possibly share some of the content of your countertransference, and acknowledge his concern as being valid. You can then express your willingness to be less abrupt with him and encourage him to let you know whenever he experiences you as being abrupt.

In existential-humanistic therapy, transparency and authenticity are the driving forces in exploring the relationship between therapist and client. Transference and countertransference are addressed openly as they emerge, within the context of transparency and authenticity. This is in contrast to some models of psychotherapy, such as classical psychoanalysis, wherein transference and countertransference are the driving forces in exploring the relationship between therapist and client - and transparency and authenticity are considered less important and at times even detrimental to exploring the transference and countertransference aspects of the relationship.

9. Emphasis on Mutuality versus Hierarchy

The focus is on a client-centered model wherein you are facilitating your client in discovering and accessing what she already knows, her self-knowledge and innate wisdom, which may be semi or unconscious to her in the present moment.

You are working collaboratively with your client to support her in empowering herself. One way you facilitate this is by identifying her resistances to being present in the moment. As her resistances are peeled back, her access to her self-knowledge and innate wisdom becomes more available.

In the mutuality of the client-therapist relationship, a deep connection is forged from the understanding that both client and therapist are moving through the human journey. This awareness is a substantial support to her self-empowerment and accessing of her courage. Her knowing that you are on the same human journey that she is helps her realize that she can work through the life issues she dreads facing. There is something very reassuring in knowing that she is not alone in dealing with her demons, and that within your own frame of reference and life experience you can empathize with what she is going through.

Mutuality encourages that both therapist and client are equals in accessing and expressing their subjectivity with one another. The power for change resides within the client's subjectivity and within the relationship between the client and therapist. Mutuality supports the client's deeper contact with herself and increased connection with you, which leads to further growth and healing for her.

The opposite of mutuality is a hierarchical model wherein the therapist evaluates the client, gives the client a diagnosis, and prescribes a treatment plan. The treatment is deemed successful if the client follows the treatment plan. The treatment is deemed unsuccessful if the client deviates from the treatment plan. In a hierarchical model the power for change resides within the therapist's expertise and authority, and within the objectivity of the treatment plan. There is minimal emphasis placed on the client's subjective experience of the treatment.

Skill Interventions

10. Deep Listening

Deep listening is the ability to listen with a deeply attuned sensitivity to your client's experience. You are listening not only to the overt content of what your client is saying, but also to the nuances of sensing his deeper, more authentic needs and his more covert and less expressed feelings in relationship to his expressed concern.

Your deep listening is communicated to your client nonverbally in your expressions and gestures, as well as verbally in reflecting back to him what he is saying to you - empathizing with his dilemma, and noting to him both in process and content what may be semi-conscious to him. Giving him feedback on what is semi-conscious to him can be an opening to allow more unconscious material to emerge, which then can be consciously explored and integrated. For example, you may say "I notice your hand is clenched... and I am sensing you are feeling angry with your boss right now... Does that resonate for you?"

Deep listening allows the client to feel powerfully heard, seen, and received.

11. Engaged Curiosity

You want to really "get" your client, and in so doing help your client "get" herself.

To get your client, you will want to tune in to your genuine curiosity to draw your client out. The direction of your curiosity can have a broad range; the purpose is to have your client describe her experience of living in every facet of her life, as fully and comprehensively as she can. For example, you may ask her how she spends her day or what she likes about her job - or if she doesn't like it, why she doesn't like it, and how does she keep herself doing it. Similarly, you may want to hear what she likes and values about her partner, what she holds back in communicating with that person, etc.

It is very important to realize that this engaged curiosity is not scripted. Rather, you are following both the lead in what your client is expressing (verbally and non-verbally) as well as your own inner promptings in what you are subjectively interested in pursuing further.

12. Have the Client Check Their Feelings, Thoughts and Bodily Sensations Behind Their Story Line

Both the immediacy and fluidity of your client's lived experience is important to facilitate. Clients can block their immediacy and/or fluidity by becoming too vested in their story line and/or stuck in the repetitive expression of their concerns.

Shifting the focus may lead to more spontaneity and more accessing of unconscious material being discovered in relationship to the concern being explored. To help your client access fresh material around his concern, ask him to see if he can access something other than what he usually accesses. For example, if he is focusing on a lot of thoughts about his concern that are looping repetitively, you may ask, "What are you feeling as you are thinking about this or telling me this?" Or, if he is focusing on a lot of feelings about his concern that are looping repetitively and not releasing, you may ask, "What are you thinking as you are feeling this, or as you are telling me this?"

At times it can be valuable to have your client check for bodily sensations behind his story line. This facilitates your client being more present in his body in the moment. You assume that he is integrated in his mind-body, rather than viewing his mind as being separate from his body. So, if your client expresses a feeling, you ask him where in his body he feels that, if he does. If he identifies that he feels it in his chest, you say to him, "Allow yourself to breathe into the feeling in your chest, and open up to whatever associations come up for you now... and share what emerges..."

13. Let the Client Do the Work - Note How It Is Going

Be aware of your client's efforts to make her life better, as well as the ways she sabotages herself, as demonstrated in the session. You become a mirror to your client, reflecting back to her what she is expressing as well as how she is expressing it.

Mirroring allows the client to be more aware of what has been pre-conscious for her. As she owns more of her pre-conscious, more of her unconscious material emerges into consciousness. For example, when she resists engaging with herself, such as talking about intense emotional material in a detached way, you may feed that back to her... "You seem quite detached as you're telling me about your grief over your mom's death." This allows her to become more aware of her detachment, which had been pre-conscious. Then, by focusing on her detachment, a range of associations can come to her that up to that point had not been fully conscious, such as her use of detachment as a way to protect herself from feeling too much emotional pain.

Mirroring can also be used to reflect back to the client an awareness of when she is expressing herself congruently. For example, when she is expressing her grief over her mom's death in a sad and tearful way that seems alive and appropriate, you can simply nod or give brief verbal acknowledgement as a way of indicating that she is on the right track in her processing.

Mirroring allows the client to be more aware of how he is living in the present moment. He can then use that feedback to empower himself by choosing more consciously ways of being he wants to maintain and ways of being he wants to modify.

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