
To Clinicians: 3 Different Approaches Asking Existential Orientation Questions

“Consummate your life. The more un-lived your life, the greater your death anxiety.” ~ Nietzsche
Accepting that we all die can help us live a more meaningful life...one of “embodied, emotional immediacy of our subjectivity.”
~Shabad.

3 Different Approaches. Use the below ideas to help frame your conversations with patients RE: their existential orientation toward death, and toward how they want to live life NOW.

I. INTRO. Yalom describes (2009, p.75) an **awakening** consciousness experience as one in which the person is primed to examine existential issues, like grief a major decision ...life milestones e.g. b-day, anniversaries...dreams... end of therapy. His point is that any awakening experience that confronts death will *enrich your life as a catalyst* for major life changes.

Yalom further notes (p.32-2) that Heidegger, 20th c. German philosopher, clarifies the paradox between HOW things are and THAT things are with his 2 modes of existence:

Everyday mode is when you are absorbed in your surroundingswith all its evanescent distractions.

Ontological mode is the study of being aware of existence & mortality... where you are more prompted to grapple with your fundamental human responsibility to construct an *authentic life of engagement, connectivity, meaning, & self- fulfillment.*

II. Existential Orientation Form (EOF)

A) Assessment-1 is a cognitive top down approach. Below is a group of questions I've used to elicit developmental memories, beliefs, further deepening the conversation around death and the meaning of your life. I prompt patients to share their deepest fears and fantasies, that they've often not spoken out loud. I ask some version of these questions:

- 1) When did you first encounter death as a child? E.g. when a pet died? or a Grandparent died?
- 2) Have you thought about dying? When did you first become aware that you would inevitably die?
- 3) How often do you allow yourself to think about your own death? What does it feel like when you do so?
- 4) What do you imagine dying? then being dead? feels like?
- 5) What happens to you after you die? dust to dust? OR do you believe your soul lives on? Do you believe in an afterlife?
- 6) Does anything concern? or frighten? you about dying?
- 7) Would you be delighted to live your life over and over again –or not?-- with no changes?
- 8) What do you need to do in your life not to look back with regret?

(NB: Some of the above questions are adapted from the questions Yalom (2009) describes on p.46)

B) Assessment-2 I've developed as a more listening, bottom up, perhaps less conscious approach, which taps your countertransference. Sit quietly with each patient and try to 'listen' in to *what* kind of resonance echoes inside you. How much do you detect an un-lived life? Imagine how each person might greet death as a way to frame how to help each to live the fullest life each wants.

III. Peter Shabad (2016) describes an annual class that he taught for years entitled “Death, Character, and Psychotherapy.”

At the first meeting of this class he asks his trainees to imagine what life would be like without death.

Would we be motivated enough to get out of bed each morning? or would we repeatedly put off until tomorrow what we could do today?

How would our relationships change? Would the meanings of hello and good-bye be altered radically?

For that matter, would love even be possible without death?

The goal is to embody as much of our mortality as we can tolerate, without either slipping into that dreaded abyss, or insulating ourselves in protective omnipotent defenses. ~ Shabad (2016)

REFERENCES:

Shabad, P. (2016) *Will You Miss Me When I am Gone: Death & Our Significance to Others: A Discussion of Frommer's 'Death is Nothing at All'.* *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (2016) 26(4): 391-399

Yalom, I, (1980/ 2009) *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death,* Jossey-Bass NYC.

You can download & print out the above full assessment page from my website www.psychotherapyworksny.com. It's free. Please email me a brief description of your experience using it, & especially any thoughts to improve it.)