

Existential Wellness

Human-Centered Approaches as Alternatives to the Medical Model

Edited by

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Existential Wellbeing Counselling and Training

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Introduction

When I reached the 7th decade of my life, I considered ending my professional activities. However, there were so many requests for Existential Wellbeing Counselling that I became intrigued by what people were finding in this approach. This ties in with my own existential theme: how do I find meaning in this stage of my life?

My longer lifespan has brought more confrontation with suffering, loss, death and a growing awareness of my own vulnerability and that of everyone and everything on this planet. Profound life lessons put me to the test; what I once proclaimed professionally now presents itself for further investigation.

My professional calling is crystallising into an *existential* approach that integrates findings from *positive* psychology. Having an eye for growth—despite limitations and problems—relieves the existential approach of its heaviness. An *experiential* approach that focuses on a bodily felt sense ensures that insights are not simply “talked about” but “touch” personal living forward experiences (Leijssen, 2021).

An *existential wellbeing* model provides a map of human existence, enabling people to situate themselves in different areas of their life and explore which values matter to them (Leijssen, 2014). The

counsellor is a fellow human being, a companion, sometimes a mentor, sometimes a guide—always reliably present and sensitively attuned to what the process needs here and now.

Because I value what people experience as most inspiring, I asked four *questions*:

1. How do you notice that this therapist works from an existential wellbeing model?
2. What emphases are there in comparison to what you have experienced with other professionals?
3. What do you take from this specific approach?
4. How would you describe the influence of this approach on the professional relationship?

In line with these questions, I'll describe: 1) the Existential Wellbeing model; 2) specific emphases; 3) impact on personal development and work; 4) the uniqueness of the professional relationship. These topics also include reference to material from our Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), "Existential Well-being Counseling: A Person-centered Experiential Approach." The fact that between 2009 and 2024, more than 90,000 participants from 185 different countries sought online contact with our ideas, points to contemporary existential needs.

Flexible forms of distance learning meet the need for lifelong learning and allow people to continue their education at times of their choosing from anywhere in the world. This makes it realistic to combine studying with working, travelling, illness and to continue education at one's own pace. To give people from developing countries the

opportunity to obtain a solid education, our MOOC is available at a very low registration fee without admission requirements.¹

The Existential Wellbeing Model

Existing or being in the world is a process that occurs in time and space. In this way, the question *What does it mean to live as a human being?* results in different answers. This allows us to understand that people relate differently to existential givens and ultimate concerns depending on their context. Existential figureheads illustrate this.

The life of Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was marked by three years in a concentration camp where he witnessed the most horrific suffering. Based on these experiences, he developed the thesis that when basic needs such as food, shelter and safety are not met, the *need for meaning is the most crucial*.

In extreme living conditions, “the last human freedom” is that of determining your own attitude in the situation. In this way, you continue to grow despite suffering, humiliation and setbacks. According to Frankl (1956/2006), discovering meaning is more important than striving for happiness and self-actualization. After the Second World War, he warned that the excessive emphasis on material prosperity, hedonistic enjoyment, and self-interest results in an existential vacuum: a massive feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness even though one has everything to make one happy.

American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom prefers a humanistic/atheistic worldview after experiencing a strict Orthodox Jewish upbringing.

¹ Massive Open Online Course (MOOC): <https://www.edx.org/course/existential-well-being-counseling-person-kuleuvenx-ewbcx>. The University of Leuven is ranked among the top 50 universities worldwide. The certificate costs 45€.

Yalom (1980) describes the *central themes* as: death, freedom and responsibility, isolation or existential loneliness, and meaninglessness. According to Yalom, denial of the finiteness of life is the source of many problems. Facing the reality of death, on the other hand, motivates us to make the most of life at every moment.

Rollo May (1983) approaches “being in the world” from the perspectives of physical existence, existence with others, existence with yourself, and existence in relation to a broader system of meaning. Emmy van Deurzen (1997; 2009) echoes these as *existential dimensions*. When we received a European grant for innovative training together with Emmy van Deurzen, our online project was launched. We added our own emphasis in developing the existential dimensions from an experiential and positive psychological approach.

The starting point of Existential Wellbeing counselling is *experiential*: focusing on bodily felt meaning is crucial in order to reach beyond intellectual knowledge alone. The experiential approach dovetails with *positive psychology*. As Gendlin (2003) observes:

It took me a long time to affirm that the ongoing bodily experiencing has its own inherent life-forwarding implying. The little steps that arise at the edge are creative, imaginative, and always in some positive direction. (Gendlin, 2003, p. 115)

A positive view of human existence does not mean that you convince yourself that life is characterised by happiness and ease; it helps you better relate to the problems that reality confronts you with (Ward & Reuter, 2011). Taking seriously the contribution of resources and strengths alongside traumas and vulnerabilities is a paradigmatic shift in psychotherapy.

Existential wellbeing counselling should not be understood as a call to ignore negative aspects of human experience, but rather as a means of showing how positive and negative experiences may be interrelated and work together. In Gendlin's vision, "every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness" (Gendlin, 1978/1981, p. 77). The purpose is to touch the bodily felt layer of living forward, awakening the vital energy that will direct healthy and creative development. In bodily terms, help means anything that brings life-forward energy.

Existential wellbeing is rooted in an experiential understanding of the *paradoxical* qualities of life. "Apparent contradictions" are seen as different poles (e.g., matter-spirit; old-new; dark-light) that complement and enrich each other. Human beings are embedded in natural and cosmic processes.

A way forward to find wellbeing and meaning can be to open up and connect to life energy as it manifests in different processes and forms. To live a reality of both oneness and difference assumes developing human potential by making conscious choices in interacting with everything that crosses your life path.

Dimensions of Human Existence

The *physical* dimension concerns the human body, nature and matter. Without care for this dimension, humans die. Values here are *health*, *safety*, *comfort*, and *beauty*. The most basic disruption occurs at the level of closing oneself off from physical experience and treating the body as a thing. Good contact with physical sensations is a basic condition for wellbeing. Overinvestment in the physical leads, among other things, to lifestyle diseases, while too little attention results in neglect of nature and disregard for the material.

In the *social* dimension, relationships with others and your place in society are central. Human life is only possible in interaction with a social network where fellow human beings care for each other. Important values are *connectedness, belonging, success, esteem, responsibility, and goodness*. Relationships are an important source of meaning. People's deepest wounds are also the result of what others do to them. Life course studies prove that ultimately it is not your bad experiences that are decisive, but rather the good people who cross your path (Vaillant, 2002).

In the *personal* dimension, the emphasis is on your inner world, self-knowledge and self-development. Values include *autonomy, freedom, knowledge, truth, and wisdom*. The greatest loneliness is not the result of a lack of social relationships, but rather the absence of a good relationship with yourself. Facing the truth about yourself and giving yourself the opportunity to become who you really are can be considered important developmental tasks. Everyone benefits when individual talents are allowed to flourish. A lack of self-knowledge leads to personal problems being projected onto others. An excessive emphasis on self-interest runs the risk of losing sight of the bigger picture.

In the *spiritual* dimension, you reflect on your place in a broader context of existence. This awareness contributes to a sense of meaning because it connects you to "more" than your limited "self." The bigger picture that inspires and motivates you can be nature, whose beauty and immense grandeur moves you; humanity, which calls on you to work for a better world; science, which helps you gain a deeper understanding of the laws of existence; or the incomprehensible *mystery* sometimes referred to as the *divine* or pure *love*.

For wellbeing, the form of transpersonal experience is secondary. It is the regular, deep connection with your sources that are necessary to

draw life energy from. Overinvestment in the spiritual mode of existence manifests itself in fanaticism, while too little attention results in emptiness and meaninglessness. When a society ignores the spiritual mode of existence, it becomes dependent on more rules, laws, and punishments to encourage its citizens to behave ethically.

On an integrative level, the spiritual is no longer “separated” from other dimensions (Leijssen, 2025). Thus, in the physical world, your spiritual attitude translates into a greater respect for nature and appreciation of beauty; in your social life, goodness becomes self-evident; the personal dimension translates in manifestations of truth. In the end, *love* is the all-encompassing energy that drives various forms of life.

The dimensions are always interwoven, like the organs in an organism depend on each other and work together for healthy functioning. Change in any domain can lead to knock-on changes in the others. Often, you only notice that a specific mode of existence has been neglected when you encounter problems. Persistent over- or underinvestment in specific modes causes serious personal and social problems. Symptoms externalise how individuals and societies have lost their way on a path to existential wellbeing.

Specific Emphasis

Feedback from participants in existential wellbeing counselling reveals what they find special about this approach. They attribute the added value of this model mainly to the explicit attention to the *physical and spiritual* aspects. In connection with the body, there is less risk of a one-sided rational approach—and “with your feet on the ground,” you do not end up in a vague search for meaning.

Gendlin (1973) talks about the “body-environment” and emphasises the importance of physical awareness as a direct way of experiencing existence. Vanhooren (2019) introduces “existential empathy.” With this form of empathy, you are in contact with the human tragedy. Your here-and-now empathy becomes compassion for humanity and awareness of existential realities that transcend your own life and that of the client.

Testimonials for Illustration

“What has stayed with me is how you connect with the organic process that is life; literally the fact that we as humans are part of nature and that our lives follow a similar natural course... That inspires confidence in myself and life, just as I trust that my garden brings growth and stagnation, decay and new life through the seasons.”

“In my systemic therapy training, the focus is mainly on whether or not you are connected to the people around you. You added a whole new dimension for me. Nature, meaning, things you can’t explain... You offered this framework, not only as explanations for what did or did not happen, but also as a way to find resources.”

“During a difficult period in my life, with many losses and changes in my work, you asked me: ‘Where do you get your nourishment from?’ I couldn’t answer, but the question stayed with me. Gradually, I found a caring core within me that I had always ignored because it was too soft and weak. ... Now I know why I am here: to nourish and thereby be nourished myself. And in the breadth of this nourishment, I transcend my own human existence.”

Impact on Personal Development and Work

Personally, in my younger years as a therapist, I did not find sufficient footing in the existential field. Only when life brought with it

profound traces of loss—and I worked through “my share” of human suffering—did intellectual knowledge evolve into my own *lived knowledge*. A prerequisite for existential empathy is that we as therapists are first and foremost able to allow, experience, and contain ontological themes such as existential anxiety, finitude, limitations, freedom, guilt, isolation, connectedness, and meaninglessness for ourselves. An example:

At the age of 67, I had an accident that put me out of action for a long time. I struggled with a lot of pain, dependence on others, and fear that things would never be right again. My physical suffering only began to ease after a third operation. During all those months, I learned more about the existential than any academic education could have ever taught me. I often thought how arrogant I had been to assume I could understand what it is like to be severely limited for a long time and to live with a lot of discomfort.

I experience deep compassion for human suffering as the most important fruit of my process. But also compassion for hard-working younger colleagues who try to combine so many tasks. It took more than a year to kick my “doing” mode and find myself in just “being.” I had previously read in Frankl’s work that some prisoners drew strength from the beauty of a sunrise; now I look forward to it every day in the early morning.

Gratitude for good things in my life is no longer an “exercise”; it puts me in a better mood without anything special having to happen. I also become more aware of the subtle difference between those who come to “help” and think they know how it works versus those who “just are” and connect with what is needed here and now.

During the operation on my knee fracture, a medical error was made. Yet I do not feel like a victim, because those difficulties have also been

the impetus for new developments. A key factor in this is that for me, it was never just “about my knee.” I asked myself: “What does this situation do to me?” and “How can I relate to these problems?”

I was fascinated by the “language” of my body—it tells a different story than the medical one. There had been a “break” with what I had “mastered” up until then. The time for “putting my best foot forward” is literally over. Since that “fall on my knees,” I have lost physical capacity but landed fully in all that is human.

It doesn't work when someone tries to tell me this is how it should be. My organism has a stubbornness that reveals itself from within at the right time. And it is helpful to have someone by my side who listens to the process with great openness, resonates with it, expresses recognition, and is interested in how living forward manifests itself. It is even more important to discover where my strength lies.

As soon as I feel space, clients will be welcomed once more. Not because I want to respond to their appeal, but because those interactions bring out the best in me. In doing so, I experience renewed peace and confidence in how I can be present as an existential ally. The painful experiences are part of my existential wisdom.

The Uniqueness of the Professional Relationship

The existential approach is similar for in-person and online interactions. However, there are several points to consider regarding the functioning of the relationship. It is important not to polarize, but—as in human existence in general—to combine the best of each.

It is surprising that online interactions lead to deep connections and a sense of presence. In our online course, trainers are “visible and audible” in clips where they present theories, exercises and roleplays.

Participants are expected to process the theory on their own and test it against their lives and work. They then communicate about this by “posting” on interaction forums. Fellow students and mentors respond to others' experiences.

These interactions take place at any time because the forum is always open. Participants and mentors can also meet in chatrooms at a specific time. Various forms of exchange on the forum and in the chatrooms lead to a high level of mutual involvement, a low threshold for participation, and a high degree of interpersonal learning.

Surprisingly, participants online get to the essence more quickly and write candidly about what is on their minds. They exchange much intimacy in a short time. The mentor ensures safety for everyone by immediately intervening in the event of disrespectful comments or ideological propaganda. Mentors consistently demonstrate how to welcome diversity by listening and communicating without prejudice.

The flexible structure of online interactions implies more self-management and discipline for participants, which is not for everyone. Some people need someone by their side to keep them “on track” and encourage them. Candidates who sign up for an online work format have usually self-selected, based on their feeling that their most important needs now lie in areas other than the relational. But the virtual environment can also be chosen as an escape from real contact. Online interpersonal patterns and relational difficulties remain more easily under the radar.

Unfulfilled relational needs and early childhood wounds require long-term intense therapeutic contact in which interpersonal patterns are lived through, and transference and countertransference are addressed in the professional relationship. For some people, a clearly

tangible presence is necessary before they can pay attention to their inner world. Someone with strong relational needs experiences the frustration of being “thrown back on themselves.”

People with interpersonal needs feel that their requests for help are not sufficiently answered, even when their exploration process is carefully guided. This problem can also arise in live contact with a therapist or trainer who ignores relational needs. Precisely in order to do justice to problematic processes, training courses for therapists can never be conducted exclusively online. A therapist must learn to recognize and deal with relational pitfalls as well as dare to engage themselves as an instrument in the here-and-now relationship.

Even participants who have sufficient skills to work without in-person contact may desire in-person meetings. This is not so much a matter of “filling gaps.” It is *added value* to see each other as flesh and blood people, or to be surprised by the liveliness of the interaction here-and-now. In recent online training courses, we are now integrating opportunities to add extra in-person contact, just as I offer people who come to me through an online pathway the opportunity to meet in-person if desired.

In both in-person and online interactions, there are sometimes encounters in professional relationships that are experienced as peak experiences:

Online client without a “home country”: *“It is a continuum between us, filled with consciousness and connection. The great value is that in this way, I can stand upright, as it were, and look at myself in you, because you have captured and mirrored my soul. I now know that peace and security are present within me and that I can never lose them, just as I will never lose what I have experienced in your guidance. Perhaps this is*

essential to existential encounters: that deep awareness of timeless connectedness."

A client lost her family at a young age. Most of our sessions are online, but sometimes she prefers an in-person session: *"Although I could list many memorable moments from the therapy, there is one exceptional thing that has stayed with me the most. A few days before our next appointment, I emailed you to ask if I could buy your book from you. When I arrived, you gave me a choice: buy a regular copy at the usual price or receive for free the copy you had once given to your deceased brother. That meant so much to me! Being allowed to receive something, being important enough... I remember it touched me so deeply that tears welled up spontaneously. That event had a particularly healing effect on me."*

Conclusion

So much comes together in someone's presence: attitudes, skills, techniques, professional knowledge, self-knowledge, life experience. The human body can serve as a mirror of the natural process that is inherent in a professional relationship: the skeleton is like the framework that provides strength and allows flexibility; within it is the beating heart of compassion that is necessary for supplying blood and oxygen to various organs and muscles with specific functions, all of which contribute to the proper functioning of the whole. None of this exists "on its own"; everything is part of an interactive process in which there is activity in specific areas depending on certain stimuli or whether we focus our attention on them.

The existential relationship radiates gentleness and mildness that is neither soft nor sentimental, but springs from the realization that we, as humans, all fumble around, often come up against our inability to relate to difficult things that come unsolicited on our life path, try to

make the best of it in the given circumstances, and are marked as we are by patterns and wounds from our past. The way in which this “humanity” is communicated in the professional context goes hand in hand with clarity in agreements about the type of relationship that is applicable here-and-now. At no point do I feel “better” than the other person; however, I am aware that someone is turning to me at that moment in the hope of finding a suitable space where his or her life is central to our interaction. My intention is that my presence adds value to this.

People are “more” than their problems—and there are always sources of strength to be found. In an existential wellbeing approach, the client is encouraged to pay attention to different aspects of living that reveal themselves. In an interwoven process, the physical, the interpersonal, the personal, and the transpersonal aspects of experiencing come together. They can be experienced as a variety of perspectives on the same phenomena.

The existential wellbeing model transcends culture, embracing Eastern and Western traditions and welcoming all beliefs from our planet. Due to their particular socio-cultural learning processes, individuals may have developed different sensitivities in specific forms of expression that articulate the process of living forward. The other side of this is that our socio-cultural context can, in giving more emphasis to some of these realms of experience, sometimes overrate them while undervaluing, losing sight of, or repressing other experiential realms. In an existential wellbeing approach, people learn to notice all living forward interactions and develop their *full potential as human beings*.

As I grow older, I still experience room for growth. My personal values have always gone hand in hand with what my work makes particularly meaningful and enjoyable. Now my age is an added

value. Heidegger (1962) refers to an ontological way of being as a conscious way of living in accordance with personal values and beliefs. That feels like an ideal that is coming closer.

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