EXISTENTIAL ISOLATION AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF LONELINESS AND THE AWARENESS OF THE “VOID” IN LIFE TO DEATH

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OBJECTIVES

• This address will explore the practice of psychotherapy for the existential clinician and its particular relationship to existential isolation.

• We will explore the implications of existential isolation and various modes of resting in the loneliness as well as apprehend that the awareness of separateness is “the source of all anxiety” in day-to-day life and in the face of one’s mortality.

• We will “deal” with this “Void” in Life, even to Death.
Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savor, so doth a little folly him who is reputation of wisdom and honor.

~Ecclesiastes 10:1
The process of deepest inquiry—a process that Heidegger refers to as “concealment,”—leads us to recognize that we are finite, that we must die, that we are free, and that we cannot escape our freedom. We also learn that the individual is inexorably alone.

(Yalom, 2010)
The Finitude of Man—Solomon Grundy

Solomon Grundy
Born on Monday
Christened on Tuesday
Married on Wednesday
Took ill on Thursday
Grew worse on Friday
Died on Saturday
Buried on Sunday
That was the end of Solomon Grundy

(From Halliwell, 1842)
As freedom and death are concepts that traditionally lie outside of the psychotherapist’s domain, it is necessary to elaborate on their specific relevance.

The situation with isolation is different.

- It is a familiar concept
- Arises frequently in everyday therapy
- The clinician encounters three different types of isolation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential.
Interpersonal isolation, generally experienced as loneliness, refers to isolation from other individuals.

It is a function on many factors:

- Geographic isolation
- The lack of appropriate social skill
- Heavily conflicted feelings about intimacy
- Personality style (such as schizoid, narcissistic, exploitative, or judgmental).
Intrapersonal isolation is a process whereby one partitions off parts of oneself.

Freud used the term “isolation” to describe a defense mechanism, especially apparent in obsession neurosis, in which an unpleasant experience is stripped of its affect, and its associative connections are interrupted.
• Refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being.

• An isolation even more fundamental—a “separation from the world”

• A vale of loneliness which has many approaches. A confrontation with death and with freedom will inevitably lead the individual into that vale.
Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then said I in my heart, that this also is vanity. For of the wise man, even as the fool, there is no remembrance forever; seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. And how doth the wise man die even as the fool! So I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me; for all is vanity and a striving after the wind.

~Ecclesiastes 2:15-17
EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

• Combines the big questions of philosophy with the tenets of psychology
• Not concerned with simply reducing various symptomology but addressing how a person finds and defines meaning, purpose, and a live well lived, despite circumstances.
• Not only concerned with “being” but “becoming”
• Freedom to choose “Freedom” is most liberating
“He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.”

Muhammad Ali. #TheGreatest
Existential Psychotherapy and Interpersonal Isolation

- Cultural factors play an important role in interpersonal isolation.
- The decline of intimacy-sponsoring institutions—the extended family. The stable residential neighborhood, the church, local merchants, the family doctor—has (in the United States at least), inexorably led to increased interpersonal estrangement.
- Therapy focuses on “relationship”. It is where it is put to test “The Relationship is what heals”.
- If the anxiety is a result of trauma, the focus will be on ameliorating the symptoms associated with the trauma.
EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND INTRAPERSONAL ISOLATION

• Harry Stack Sullivan posited that in the contemporary psychotherapy scene “isolation” is not only to refer to formal defense mechanisms but in a more casual way to connote any form of fragmentation of the self.

• Thus, intrapersonal isolation results whenever one stifles one’s own feelings or desires, accepts “oughts” or “shoulds” as one’s own wishes, distrusts one’s own judgment, or buries one’s own potential.

• Thus, the primary focus in Existential psychotherapy is “authenticity” with a goal of reintegrating the “parts” into the “whole”.

• Discovering the “good”, the “bad”, and the “ugly” of oneself and accepting it.
EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND EXISTENTIAL ISOLATION

• Existential isolation produces a highly uncomfortable subjective state and, as in the case of any dysphoria, is not tolerated by the individual for long.
• Unconscious defenses “work” on it and quickly bury it.
• These defenses work without respite because the isolation is within one, always waiting to be recognized.
• “The waves of the ether,” as Martin Buber says, “roar on always, but for most of the time we have turned of our receivers.”
• “Man,” Buber stated, does not exist as a separate entity: “Man is a creature of the between.”
• Two basic types of relationships, thus, two types of in-betweeness
• “I-Thou” and “I-It”
• The exploration of the implications of existential isolation and various modes of resting in the loneliness is perpetual, not “fixed” and is “process oriented” as opposed to “goal oriented”

• It is important to apprehend that the awareness of separateness is “the source of all anxiety” in day-to-day life as well as in the face of one’s mortality.

• Anxiety serves as a guide to lead one back, by way of uncanniness to awareness of isolation and nothingness.
DEATH EXISTENTIAL AND ISOLATION

• It is the knowledge of “my death” that makes one fully realize that no one can die with or for one.
• Heidegger states that “though one can go to his death for another, such ‘dying for’ can never signify that the other has had his death taken away in the slightest degree. No one can take the other’s death away from him.
• At the most fundamental level dying is the most lonely human experience.

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“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

~Martin Luther King, Jr.
REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

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