

Summary of Experiential Stances of the Existential–Integrative (EI) Model¹

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Overview

The general idea of EI therapy is to assist clients to optimize choice (freedom) within the natural and self-imposed (i.e., cultural) limitations of living. These limits may emphasize one's physiology, environmental conditioning, cognitive capacity, range of affect, and so on. Choice is characterized by the capacity to constrict and expand as the person and situation demand. Although choice always entails will, it does not have to be willful; it can, if a person is so inclined, reflect deliberate decisions to “give up” one's will or to stay present to that which impels one.

The client's desire and capacity for change is the key determinant of choice. Desire and capacity for change are derivative of clients' and therapists' dispositions. To the degree that therapists are open and available to clients for deeper contact, clients too, within their unique parameters, may become maximally open and available. Generally the greater clients' desires and capacities for change, the more they can become present to themselves and the more they can “occupy” the denied poles of their (self–world) existence. Through occupying the poles of their existence, clients can discover themselves and roam within, as it were, to live as richly, poignantly, and fully as the designs of their lives will permit.

¹ Excerpted and slightly adapted from *Existential-Humanistic Therapy*. Washington, DC: APA Press. Based on material from Kirk Schneider's *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 89-90), *Rediscovery of Awe* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2004), and *Awakening to Awe* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2009).

The following are stances or conditions of the experiential (i.e., immediate, affective, kinesthetic, and profound) level of contact within the EI model. (The experiential level of contact generally, but not necessarily, follows the more programmatic non- and semi-experiential levels of contact within the EI model. See *Existential-Humanistic Therapy* [2010] and *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy* [2008] for an elaboration). These experiential stances are in rough order of priority:

Presence

Presence holds and illuminates that which is palpably (immediately, affectively, and kinesthetically) significant within the client and between client and therapist. Presence holds and illuminates that which is charged and implies the question, What is really going on here within the person and between the person and me? And how is one *willing* to live? Presence is the “soup,” the atmosphere within which a struggle or battle becomes clarified.

Invoking the Actual

Invoking the actual is helping the client into that which is palpably significant or charged. Put another way, it calls attention to the part of the client that is attempting to emerge. Invoking the actual is characterized (though not exhausted) by the following:

- Topical focus, as in questions such as “What’s of concern?” “What really matters right now?” “Where are you at?”
- Personal focus, as in encouraging “I” statements or statements in the first-person; staying present to what really matters at a given moment; or giving a concrete example.

- Topical expansion, as in questions and invitations such as “Can you tell me more?” “Stay with that feeling for a moment.” “Try slowing down.”
- Attention to process as much or more than content, as in attending to the preverbal/kinesthetic way clients talk and hold themselves, their vocal fluctuations and breathing, and attention to process/content discrepancies such as “I hear your serious words, and yet you laugh.”
- Embodied meditation, or concerted attention to body sensations, often accompanied by invitations to clients to place their hand on areas noted, such as tension areas or areas that feel blocked, and by follow-up invitations to associate any other feelings, sensations, or images to these aforementioned areas.
- Interpersonal encounter, or attention to charged themes in the living therapeutic relationship; attention to process dimensions of themes; pursuing and exploring the associations to those dimensions; and mutuality as facilitative of client self-exploration.

Vivifying and Confronting Resistance (Protections)

Vivifying resistance is *alerting* clients about how they block palpably significant material. Vivifying resistance is exemplified by noting and tagging points at which clients diverge from or suppress emotionally charged material. Confronting resistance, on the other hand, is intended to *alarm* clients about how they block palpably relevant material. Confronting resistance must be cautiously engaged. If confrontation is too harsh, it can retraumatize clients; if it is ill-timed, it can prompt destructive backlashes or, conversely, passive-dependency. Both vivifying and confronting help clients to “see” close-up how they construct their worlds and

implicitly challenge clients to make a decision about those worlds. Put another way, resistance work holds a mirror to the side of the client that is attempting to keep herself or himself in the familiar yet debilitating pattern of the past. By implication it builds the counterwill (or frustration) necessary for the client to overcome her or his blocks.

Rediscovery of Meaning and Awe

As clients overcome the blocks to that which deeply matters in their lives, they begin to develop new, more aligned life paths. These paths may take the form of a new job, a project, or a relationship. But they may also grow beyond specific goals to encompass the freedom to embrace life itself—in all its stark possibility. This new relationship to life is often characterized by awe—the humility and wonder or *sense of adventure* toward all that exists. This adventure is the same that clients experience—albeit in embryonic form-- from the beginning of therapy. From the start, in other words, clients learn to shift from abject terror to blossoming wonder—from humiliation to audacity-- and this template, as it were, forms the basis for clients to experience awe: the maximal capacity to *live*.