

The Value of Existential Distress

an Opportunity to Focus
on What is Really Important

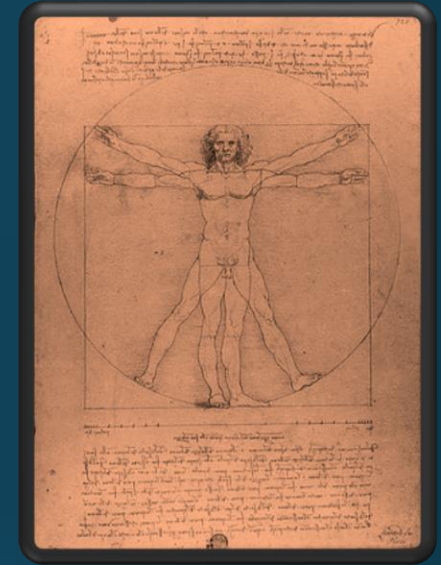
Fred Grewe, D.Min., BCC

**I have no conflicting financial
relationships to disclose.**

Fred Grewe, D.Min., BCC

Objectives for this Workshop

1. Gain an increased knowledge on the basis and symptoms of end-of-life existential suffering
2. Learn specific verbal and non-verbal skills to enhance difficult end-of-life conversations
3. Learn non-pharmaceutical therapies to ameliorate end-of-life existential suffering



4 SOURCES OF EXISTENTIAL DISTRESS



Irvin Yalom
Existential Psychotherapy, 1980

Data

THE HUMAN CONDITION

God

What
we
have



What
we
want

Who
we
are



Who
we
want
to be

Having
to
decide



Not
knowing
what to
do

Peter Rollins
Embracing the Absurd, 2016

“Although the physicality
of death destroys man,
the idea of death
saves him.”

Irvin Yalom

Existential Psychotherapy, 1980

Think of death not as an
interruption of life, but
rather as life's destination.

John S. Dunne
The Way of all the Earth, 1978

SIGNS OF EXISTENTIAL DISTRESS

Why me?

Why now?

What did I do to deserve this?

Why won't God take me?

There must be some purpose for
me?

Is there hope?

Can I be forgiven?

What happens when I die?

How long will this last?

How will I be remembered?

Pain is a great change agent.
Pain teaches us we are alone.
First step in 12 Steps.
A call to wake up.
Existential pain can shatter our
false illusions of self-importance.
Existential pain can provide an
opportunity to focus on the truly
important.
It is also normal at life's end!

THE VALUE OF EXISTENTIAL DISTRESS

HEALING VS. CURE

- To be healed means to regain wholeness in the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspect of human experience (WHO)
- Healing is independent of illness, impairment, cure of disease, or death (Kleinman / Pilch)
- Healing is the personal experience of transcendence of suffering (Hauerwas)

Having the End-of-Life Conversation

- Don't just do something – sit there!
- Communication is more than 85% non-verbal
- Silence is often therapeutic
- Appropriate touch
- Allow yourself to be human and **feel** emotion
- Follow the Patient's lead
- Honor the Patient's story
- Rely on Your Team



“I have a lot of tools I have collected over the years, but in serving, I don't lead with my tools. I find that if I start pulling those tools out and setting them down between myself and my client, then one of us is sure to trip over them. So instead I lead with my humanity.”

Frank Ostaseski
The 5 Invitations, 2017

“In the long run it is the persistent nurturing role of the therapist who has dealt with his or her own death complex sufficiently that helps the patient overcome the anxiety and fear of his impending death.”

*Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
On Death and Dying, 2003*

It is an unwritten spiritual
law of the Universe ...

***“You cannot
give what you
do not have.”***



Ideas to Soothe Existential Pain

- ▶ Try to specifically reflect back to Patients where their life had meaning
- ▶ And how they have brought meaning to you – what they have taught you
- ▶ Treat the dying person as normal
- ▶ Reframe vulnerability as an invitation to *intimacy*
- ▶ Suggest they bless their loved ones
- ▶ Give the gifts of affirmation and acceptance



Ideas to Soothe Existential Pain

- ▶ Bad News – There is no cure for it
- ▶ Good News – talking about it diminishes the intensity of the pain
- ▶ Better News – It can become the fertile soil for living a more engaging life



GOALS OF TREATMENT





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iHeart Radio, & Amazon Music

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