

# FOUR EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGES: THREE RESPONSES TO EACH

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Thomas Greening, Ph.D.

tgreening@saybrook.edu

Existential humanistic psychology postulates certain basic challenges inherent in the human condition, and studies how people come to terms with these paradoxical "givens" (Bugental, 1971; May, 1961; Greening, 1971; Yalom, 1980). Thus, it includes the study of pathological reactions, normal responses, and creative initiatives by individuals, groups and cultures. Using the insights from social constructionism, we must also acknowledge that the assignment of these evaluative descriptive labels may say as much about the labeler as the person or behavior being labeled.

This paper considers four existential challenges:

- 1) Life (and death). We are alive but we will die, and we live a world that both supports and negates life.
- 2) Meaning (and absurdity). We have a conscious capacity and desire for meaning, but we live in a confusing and sometimes chaotic world that offers many meaning systems and also denies meaning.
- 3) Freedom (and determinism). We are free and determined, and we live in a world that allows and constricts our freedom.
- 4) Community (and aloneness). Human desire and capacity for authentic relatedness are countered by inauthenticity, alienation and loneliness.

Each challenge consists of a blessing and a curse, a capacity for being that also entails non-being, an opening restricted by finiteness. We are endowed with "some" but not "enough." Our glasses are half full and half empty, and we can't agree on what "half" is. We must choose what to do with the "some" and how to endure the "not enough."

To each of the four existential givens or challenges we have a choice of three possible responses:

- 1) Simplistic over-emphasis on the positive aspect of the paradox. False triumph over the difficulties presented by the challenge.
- 2) Simplistic over-emphasis on the negative aspect of the paradox. Fatalistic surrender to the difficulties presented by the challenge.
- 3) Confrontation, creative response, and transcendence of the challenge.

### **Challenge 1: Life (and death)**

We are alive but mortal, embodied but finite. Each of us lives in a body that must be conceived, carried in a womb, born, nourished and protected, and that inevitably dies from aging, disease, assault or accident. Thus embodied, we experience pleasure and pain, security and danger, vitality and vulnerability. We feel hearty and fragile, strong and weak. We revel in our aliveness and quake with our fear of dying. We can become energetic and wise about taking care of our bodies, and we remain at the mercy of deadly forces.

#### **Response 1:**

Optimistic over-emphasis on aliveness. Search for immortality. Denial of death. Grandiose assertion of vitality of mind or body. Refusal to acknowledge finite embodiedness. Delusions of invulnerability. Cult of youth, beauty, wealth, power, sensuality. Illusions that the life of the body or the will can provide eternal life, through, hedonism, action, power. "Ozymandias of Egypt." Counter-phobic mastery through high-risk sports, war, sexual exploits, health and diet fads.

#### **Response 2:**

Pessimistic, morbid obsession with death. Resignation, fatalism, capitulation, even cooperation with death. Suicide, accident proneness, neglect of health. William Blake: "Half in love with easeful death." Negativistic preoccupation with the transitoriness of being.

#### **Response 3:**

Celebration of life with all its phases and stages, knowing that they form a story with an end. at least of life as we know it. Awareness and affirmation of the life cycle. Confrontation of death and physical being, living, as Don Juan in Castaneda's books tells us, with death over our left shoulder -- not afraid or depressed, but aware and choosing life in the face of death. Acceptance and transcendence of mortality.

### **Challenge 2: Meaning (and absurdity)**

As individuals and as a species we have only a finite capacity for consciousness, awareness, thought and construction of meaning.

#### **Response 1:**

True believers. Obsessive exaltation of rational thought, or empirical science, or blind faith, or intuitive awareness as certain paths to "the answer." Fanatical belief systems and loyalty, compulsive system-building, scholasticism, scientism. Deification of the human mind. "Man is the measure of all things." Insistence that life has meaning, that we determine it now, that it remains fixed and dependable,

and that others support our meaning systems. Addictions to ideologies, cults and gurus.

**Response 2:**

Compulsive iconoclasm. Anti-intellectualism. Denial of all meaning and the quest for meaning. Derogation of learning, thought and belief systems. Militant atheism, nihilism. Ridicule of believers. Collapse into despair and meaningless. Flight into action, acquisition, drugs, dogma or death to escape consciousness and the wish for meaning. Insistent declaration that existence is meaningless, that life is absurd and that the universe is ultimately chaotic.

**Response 3:**

Enjoyment and effective use of consciousness, without fixation on any one form of it as the total or permanent solution. Flexible ability to shift levels and forms of consciousness, even to lose consciousness, depending on circumstances and goals. "Willing suspension of disbelief." Openness to meaning and belief systems. Receptivity and curiosity. Ability to hold and consider contradictory ideas in one's mind at the same time. Ability to choose and affirm and act upon provisional data and theories, while remaining open to feedback and revision.

**Challenge 3: Freedom (and determinism)**

Finite capacity for freedom and choice. We seem to have some free will, or at least some of us sometimes like to think we do. Thus, we have choices about what to do with our freedom or illusion of freedom, how to express and expand it, or at least how to test out whether we do indeed have any.

**Response 1:**

Triumphant assertion of freedom without bounds. Demands for self-expression unrestrained by other people, social systems, physical constraints. Icarus. Rousseau's "natural man" who allegedly would blossom into perfection if supported instead of suppressed by society. Confusion of license with freedom. Rampant individualistic self-actualization made into a religion or ideology, without thought of others.

**Response 2:**

Escape from freedom and choice (Fromm). Abdication, surrender to tyrants, self-enslavement, fatalism, co-dependency, family enmeshment, substance abuse. Building a "case" that life itself or

other people or our economic or physical limitations totally imprison and predestine us. Conclusion that deterministic science or socioeconomic conditions or geo-political forces sufficiently explain the causes of all human events.

**Response 3:**

Exploration and expansion of freedom with awareness of the interpersonal and physical context. Self-assertion with humble respect for one's finiteness, and gratitude for one's powers, however limited. Celebration of acts of apparent courage and freedom against odds.

**Challenge 4: Community (and aloneness)**

Finiteness and relatedness. We are social beings, conceived, carried, born, and raised in relation to others. Our consciousness grows largely out of experiences with others that are internalized. We are, or are the result of, a giant conversation or dance with others that continues until we die, and even after we die by our survivors. But each of us is also alone. No one has exactly the same existence that I do, and therefore cannot fully share my experience. I am often physically alone, and must make choices that only I can make regardless of the help and consultation other people offer. My being is encapsulated within my skin and my skull, and yet also extends beyond these.

**Response 1:**

Denial of isolation, clutching at relationships. Hypergregariousness, co-dependency. Over-involvement in organizations, mass movements. Masochistic, selfless service to others. Excessive childbearing, family enmeshment, socializing to escape loneliness.

**Response 2:**

Resignation or wallowing in loneliness. Misanthropic rejection of people. Snobbishness or self-effacement as ways to distance oneself and avoid the risks of reaching out and being disappointed. Making a virtue or a philosophical system out of aloneness. Steppenwolf. Holding grudges, refusing to forgive, as ways to maintain and justify protective barriers against unpredictable intimacy.

**Response 3:**

Willingness to risk I-Thou encounters in a world that necessarily and often tragically entails I-It relationships. Commitment to connect authentically with other people in spite of being aware of the hazards and barriers to intimacy. Courageous offering of oneself while feeling compassion for one's fears and hurts and those of others.

At any given time, one of these four existential challenges may predominate in a person's life, with the other three challenges assuming relative degrees of priority in relation to it and to each other. Thus, after a close call with death, a person might become very concerned with the challenge of life vs. death, and then also be more concerned with meaning vs. absurdity, or freedom vs. determinism, or community vs. aloneness. In response to each challenge, any one of the three responses may be chosen. For example, the survivor of a near death experience might choose to celebrate life, relinquish obsessive intellectual systems to explain the meaning of life, become more risk-taking in expressing freedom, but withdraw from relationships with people who dependently cling to each other to avoid confronting existential challenges. Various combinations of pathological, normal and creative responses to each of the four challenges may occur. It is possible to diagram these choices using a semi-projective test being developed.

Psychological maturity or self-actualization in an existential sense can be considered as the ability to cope creatively with all four of the existential challenges by:

1. Choosing to affirm one's aliveness even while confronting and transcending finiteness and death.
2. Constructing and affirming meanings without idolatry.
3. Attempting responsible freedom within limiting contexts.
4. Loving and encountering others, and participating in larger human communities, while acknowledging separateness.

These are the goals of existential humanistic psychotherapy, and they are also intrinsic to its process.

**LIFE vs. DEATH**

1. Over-positive, false triumph
2. Over-negative, surrender
3. Confrontation, transcendence of dilemma; balance

**MEANING vs. ABSURDITY**

1. Over-positive, false triumph
2. Over-negative, surrender
3. Confrontation, transcendence of dilemma; balance

**FREEDOM vs. DETERMINISM**

1. Over-positive, false triumph
2. Over-negative, surrender

**RELATEDNESS vs. SEPARATENESS**

1. Over-positive, false triumph
2. Over-negative, surrender

3. Confrontation, transcendence  
of dilemma; balance

3. Confrontation, transcendence  
of dilemma; balance

## References

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**THOMAS GREENING, Ph.D.**

Diplomate in Clinical Psychology

PSY 1178

1314 Westwood Boulevard, Suite 205

Los Angeles, California 90024

310-474-0064

tgreening@saybrook.edu

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On page 5 of Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy* there is a definition of psychotherapy which I have revised and expanded in an attempt to express the essentials of existential-humanistic psychotherapy:

Existential humanistic psychotherapy is  
a conversation and encounter  
between two people  
in which they confront

finiteness and death,  
determinism and chaotic freedom,  
isolation and enmeshment,  
dogma, absurdity and meaninglessness—  
especially as experienced by the client—

and attempt to uncover and create

affirmation of life,  
aware and responsible choicefulness,  
relatedness and identity,  
meaning and value—  
especially for the client.

When the session goes well  
there is a movement from

nonbeing and inauthenticity to authentic aliveness,  
reactivity and determinism to intentionality and creativity,  
estrangement and loneliness to loving engagement,  
deficiency motivation to being motivation—  
especially for the client.