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# Poetry therapy and existential practice

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how poetry and poetry therapy are useful tools in existentially oriented psychotherapeutic practice. This paper will accomplish this aim in several ways. First, a brief introduction to poetry therapy will be presented. Second, the main principles of existential therapy will be explored. Third, the congruence between poetry therapy and existential theory will be addressed. Fourth, exercises will be presented that can be used in existentially oriented practice. Lastly, a case example demonstrates the use of poetry and poetry therapy in existential psychotherapy.

This article represents a departure from most scholarship on poetry therapy, the majority of which is rooted in psychoanalytically oriented traditions. It appears that the preponderance of theorists in the expressive arts therapies in general have been those influenced by psychoanalysis and modern psychoanalytic theory (Mazza, 1999). This is lamentable, since therapists, who practice from theoretical orientations not congruent with this approach, may not explore the uses of poetry and poetry therapy in their work. I contend that poetry and poetry therapy are congruent with many additional theoretical orientations. For the field of poetry therapy to progress, and expand its current boundaries, scholars must demonstrate its relevance to other theoretical and practice orientations. Previously, such work has been conducted with the strengths—perspective of social work treatment (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Bender, 2002).

## Poetry therapy

Poets and philosophers have been aware of the curative and healing nature of poetry for millennia.

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Long before there were professionals, poets, and storytellers who helped people deal with their deepest fears by echoing the struggles of humanity in their poems, myths, and stories (Harrower, 1972). In hearing these works, people have learned that they are not alone with their pains; that they are part of a greater struggle. The Aristotelian concept of psychagogia (Lerner, 1981) “the leading out of the soul through the power of art” (p. 8) predates Freud’s notion of sublimation by over a thousand years. Aristotle discovered that through the process of creating poetry, people were able to transform their problems into power and their sadness into strength.

Many poets have discovered the liberational power of the poem in helping them maximize their own emotional and spiritual resources. For example, American counter culture poet Charles Bukowski (1991) saw poetry as the “ultimate psychiatrist.” While poetry has been therapeutic to many “professional” poets, poetry can be therapeutic and used therapeutically with many different groups of people.

Recently, Mazza (1999) has developed a model for poetry therapy practice that has helped delineate its therapeutic components. This model is presented, as it lays the groundwork for the types of exercises and interventions that are possible for the therapist utilizing poetry in practice. These components are:

1. The receptive/prescriptive component, involving the introduction of literature into therapy.
2. The expressive/creative component involving the use of client writing in therapy.
3. The symbolic/ceremonial component involving the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling.

## Existential theory

Prior to a discussion of existential theory, it should be noted that in a very real sense, any attempt at

categorizing the central principles of the theory is bound to fail. At its core, existential thought applies a phenomenological approach, advocating for understanding human phenomena in the present moment, as an unfolding process (Spinelli, 1989). To the existentialist, life is a phenomena that constantly unfolds in each moment. This description applies equally to the theory of existentialism itself; it is best understood not a set of isolated, abstract principles, but through the unfolding drama of actual lives (Sartre, 1965). At its core, existential theory helps provide guidance into what makes for meaningful and fulfilling lives for people in general, and for individuals in particular (Mullan, 1992). Existential theory is predicated upon basic truths about human existence (Krill, 1978). van Deurzen-Smith (1997) asserts that in existential psychotherapy:

The objective is to enable people to stand courageously in the emotion of life in a way that ennobles and revitalizes them, whilst taking account of the context and horizons of the world in which they live. (p. 3)

For half a century, existential psychotherapy has had a profound impact on various helping professions (Frankl, 1963). In spite of its impact, misunderstandings about the theory may have inhibited its popularity and influence. With concepts such as dread, angst and bad faith, existential theory is often thought of as presenting a pessimistic view of humankind. However, at its core, existentialism professes a positive and optimistic view of humankind (Willis, 1994). People are seen as being able to accept the harsh realities of existence and come to live an authentic, full life (Heidegger, 1927). Existential principles that will be explored in this paper are meaning, death, anxiety, creation and responsibility. This list is by no means exhaustive, yet can be found in much of the existential literature, and has particular relevance to poetry therapy.

*What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of my life?* These are questions that both philosophers and the common person have grappled with since human beings began to possess language. Meaning, and a person's ability to construct a meaningful life, lies at the heart of existential thought (Bugental, 1978). People are thought to process the capacity for creating meaning and fulfillment even within the direst social contexts. Frankl (1963) noted that even those living in Nazi concentrations camps were often able to establish a sense of relevance and meaning in life. Indeed, existentialists believe that each person possesses the capacity to create a meaningful, worthwhile existence in spite of not only external circumstances, but painful pasts as well.

Sartre (1956) posited that existence precedes essence. That is, existence and life spring forth naturally, and it is only after the conscious mind is *aware* of life that meaning is ascribed to it. To the existentialist, one of the great truths of life is that existence is inherently meaningless, which means that each person has both the freedom and responsibility to create their own meaning (Kierkegaard, 1954).

This proposition leads directly to the importance of personal responsibility in existential thought. Since life has no inherent meaning, each person is responsible for creating a life that brings them fulfillment (May, 1967). Since joy and meaning can be encountered in even the most oppressive situations, surely the majority of people who do not experience such trauma can lead a worthwhile life. The person who takes responsibility for their own meaning and joy is said to live an authentic existence (Krill, 1986). The person living an authentic life does not hide behind false ideologies or myths. They realize that while some of life's greatest joys occur with others, each is ultimately responsible for their own happiness.

Anxiety is a normal consequence of living. The realization of our own idiosyncratic creation of meaning leads one to realize that in a very real sense, they are alone. A representative image of this notion is that of an individual naked in front of the universe, stripped bare of all pretense. This realization is painful and causes anxiety, which leads many to escape through addictions, false ideologies, and other "bad faith" self-deceptions (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997). Such self-deceptions become costly, as those who do not work towards living authentic, meaningful lives are bound to become lost in dread and neurotic anxiety (Tillich, 1952). Neurotic anxiety is anxiety not faced; the roots of which remains un-revealed. To the existentialist, the anxiety over unpaid parking tickets and other small worries helps people avoid facing the true source of anxiety: the omnipresent specter of death (Heidegger, 1927).

The reality of death is a key notion in existential thought (Moustakas, 1956). Being aware of one's own death, the person living *authentically* examines his or her choices and consciously chooses to live to the fullest. They take chances in order to be their own person, and are conscious of the often subtle, sometimes not so subtle, forces that pull them towards conformity and mediocrity. To paraphrase from Somerset Maugham's (1942) classic *Of Human Bondage*, upon waking up in the morning, the protagonist asks death what it has in store for him today. The awareness of death leads to anxiety. According to existential thought, this existential anxiety can be experienced in two different ways. It can be debilitating and overwhelming, leading to what is referred to as dread (depression), and the choice of escape through various

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