

## A Therapeutic Approach Illuminating Meaning and Desire for Change

A review of the video



### **Existential Therapy**

with Kirk J. Schneider

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006. American Psychological Association Psychotherapy Videotape Series I, Item No. 4310756. \$99.95

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Reviewed by  
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☰ In *Existential Therapy*, Kirk J. Schneider describes his therapeutic method as a synthesis of existential perspectives. He notes being particularly influenced by the teachings of James Bugental and Rollo May. Schneider's four major themes, (a) presence, (b) encouraging the client into the present, (c) vivifying the defenses that influence one's behavior patterns, and (d) creation of meaning, indeed, corroborate fundamental constructs that Bugental and May emphasized in their writings. Schneider's concept, "encouraging the client into that which is present," is reminiscent of Bugental's (1991) perspective on vital aspects of existentialism. It also supports May's (1961) concept of authenticity. Some of Schneider's stated goals of the therapeutic process, creating "presence," helping a client "bring alive that which is alive," and "illuminat[ing] meaning," are highly consistent with May's description of "being-in-the-world... in accord with the nature of ourselves in the world" (as cited in Zeig, 1996, p. 91).

☰ In the video, Schneider strategically and effectively interposes aspects of cognitive-behavioral, object relations, and insight-oriented theories with an actual client, not an actor playing a client. He exhibits seasoned competence in adhering to an essential existential set throughout the single-session interview, yet carefully implements numerous therapeutic interventions that reflect elements of clinical orientations other than existentialism. For example, Schneider demonstrates the value of what he calls "creating the space" that differs little from creating a Rogerian (1961) supportive environment or just about any other clinical trust-building or rapport-establishing introductory process. However, he emphasizes the necessity of "creating the space" for purposes clinicians from other orientations might minimize in terms of critical clinical constructs (e.g., "for them to alert themselves," to "clear the way to renew his or her life," "to explore connections the client has made," and to allow the client to be "fully present"). Schneider's existential environment validates the client's perceptions and experiences without collusion or enabling rationalization of the status quo. It sets the stage for the client to learn to be with his or her internal process with increasing awareness and introspection, as one would expect to see in an insight-oriented approach, yet without the attendant need to evoke anxiety to initiate insight. Dissimilar from insight-oriented approaches and more in line with Maslow's (e.g., 1998) perspectives on personal growth toward contentment with "being," Schneider's integrative existentialism appears less likely to induce affect avoidance and intellectualization when addressing stressful issues and more likely to promote a sense of constructive duality of affective and cognitive self-awareness.

☰ The ability to assist the client's emotional presence while exploring alternative experiences behaviorally, cognitively, interpersonally, and affectively encourages personal resilience. This appears to establish an opportunity for the client to experience a kind of control within the therapeutic process rather than an externally derived control from the authority or expert—the therapist. Akin to behavioral

and cognitive-behavioral methods, the therapist's role provides a model for personal self-exploration and self-direction.

☰ In attempts to move the client toward “meaning cultivation,” a goal Schneider describes as central to a positive therapeutic experience, he observes the client's patterns of behavior, using terms consistent with the behavioral lexicon such as *rehearsal*, *conditioned learning*, *secondary gain*, and *degrees of self-efficacy*. With explanations one might have heard from the likes of Beck (e.g., 1979) or Bandura (e.g., 1977, 1997), he successfully integrates cognitive restructuring, Socratic questioning, and exploration of competing thoughts, meaning, and behaviors. With an interpersonal style and affective tone consistent with fundamental existentialism, he shifts easily among constructs adapted from other schools of thought.

☰ Schneider demonstrates an advancing of existential theory by integrating philosophies representative of empirically validated cognitive and behavioral therapies as well as client-centered, depth, and insight-oriented therapies. Bugental (1978) once said

In action therapies, the focus of attention tends to be on what the therapist does with and to the client. The therapist suggests physical actions...  
The inner search therapies, in contrast, place more attention on what the client finds within the client's own stream of awareness. (p. 15)

Schneider's techniques suggest an exploration by the client and therapist that yields productive movement toward restructured thinking, congruent affect, and constructive behavior. His application exemplifies a maturation of the theory by its ability to lend itself to flexible integration of a variety of different but complementary constructs while maintaining the fundamental integrity of existential theory. Like many, it is a method perhaps most easily applied to populations traditionally viewed as ideal for insight-oriented work—verbal, intelligent, psychologically minded, and introspective. However, inherent in this existential method, its very multidimensional nature likely lends itself to an effective therapeutic process even with less insightful, less verbal, or less sophisticated clients than the one with whom he demonstrates the therapy in the video.

☰ His seasoned competence and willingness to present his skill in the filmed format offer another way to reach audiences that solely written text may not. The quality and educational structure of the film are easy to follow, and the format is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of intent and application of the therapeutic approach.

## References

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