

Free to choose:

existential coaching
in practice

Coach, trainer and
consultant **Nick Wright** draws
on his own experiences and abiding
faith in God to explore how we can
support our clients through
existential coaching

'The notion of choice lies at the epicentre of human experience.'¹

I had precautionary tests recently for a potentially life-threatening condition. Thankfully, the results turned out to be OK, but it's experiences like this that often bring existential issues into sharp relief. Existential coaching focuses on helping a person explore his or her own sense of 'being in the world', that strange psychic awareness *that* we are in the world before *what* we are in the world.² At times, such awareness can feel mysterious, unfathomable, disorientating and anxiety-provoking. It recalls one of those moments when, as a child, I gazed up into the night sky, saw the stars and the enormity of space, imagined space and time going on forever, and felt dizzy and perplexed by it. It can also raise deep questions to the surface such as, 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?'

Choice

According to existentialist thought, a person's essence isn't fixed but we become who we are through the choices we make.³ Our choices are influenced by factors such as the assumptions, beliefs, judgments, hopes and fears we hold about ourselves, the same we hold about others, and how we experience and act in our relationships with others in our everyday circumstances, and in the decisions that we face and make. Existentialist coaches sometimes refer to this as our 'stance in the world', that is, how we perceive, position ourselves and act in our everyday lives. Our stance both reflects something of our sense of and our way of being in the world, and shapes who we are and become in the world. I can share an example from personal experience to illustrate this phenomenon.

When my youngest daughter was seven years old, I took her to a theme park that had a very high and steep 'death slide'. I was surprised and impressed to see her quietly but resolutely psyche herself up to leap down its harrowing slope. When she finally did do it, I asked her how she managed to bring herself to push herself off its terrifying edge. She responded in a way that humbled and amazed me: 'Firstly, when you told me it would be OK, I trusted you that it *would* be OK, even though it looked so scary. Secondly, when I write about what we did today in my diary tonight, I want to be able to write that I went on the slide *even though* I was afraid of it, not that I didn't go on the slide *because* I was afraid of it. That's the kind of person I want to be.' I felt awe-struck and speechless.

Curiously, we are often unaware of making choices, or deny to ourselves that we are making choices in order to avoid the responsibility that choice implies, and unaware of the underlying metaphysical world view we hold that both influences and is influenced by our choices.⁴ It's as if we can live at a superficial level, and sometimes choose to live at that level as a form of self-defence, or life-coping mechanism. The problem is that if we only live at this level, we may fail to be who we can become in the world; deny ourselves and others a deeper and more fulfilling life experience; struggle with contact in intimate relationships; expend our time, energy and resources on distractions that aim to suppress or avoid facing the discomfort and anxiety that existential issues can evoke.³

Anxiety

One of the goals of existential coaching is therefore to raise world view and choice into awareness, in order to enable clients to live more authentic lives. It's about enabling clients to acknowledge and deal with underlying anxiety, tensions and conflicts that could be experienced symptomatically in psychological, emotional, physical or relational difficulties, or in problematic patterns of behaviour. Van Deurzen summarises this approach as, 'to help people to get better at facing up to difficulties with courage instead of running away from them'.⁵ It necessarily involves a willingness to explore issues beneath the surface, a willingness to face anxiety and a willingness to explore alternative ways of being and acting in the world. This calls for compassionate support from the coach.

It reminds me of a volunteer assignment I did with a Christian psychological expert in Germany, not long after the Berlin wall came down and East and West were reunified. We were working in a social work project with young people, often from fairly poor and dysfunctional family backgrounds, who were being seduced by the far right to join new neo-Nazi

groups. The groups provided these young people with a much needed sense of identity, belonging and purpose in the world. As part of his practice, the psychologist would touch sensitively on spiritual-existential issues and questions where it seemed appropriate. A secular humanistic colleague challenged him vehemently on this, insisting that psychologists should never stray into the spirituality arena.

The psychologist empathised with his colleague's concerns about professional ethics and the risks of pressurising and indoctrinating vulnerable young people. At the same time, he believed that true spirituality speaks to life's deepest questions, experiences and actions. The psychologist responded: 'These young people often talk in therapy about their deepest fears, about life and death, issues that are very real for them. It's often such fears that lead them to seek a sense of identity, security and purpose in these sinister groups. We cannot afford to separate our thinking or our practice into neat, distinct, spheres of influence. The matters we and they are dealing with bring profound psychosocial, existential and spiritual issues face to face in the room.'⁶ His challenger fell silent.

Practice

So, what could existential coaching look like in practice? After contracting to establish trust, the coach will invite the client to share their story, particularly focusing on issues that led them here in the first place. The coach's role at this stage is primarily to listen and, over time, to reflect back any beliefs and values that surface implicitly or explicitly in the client's account, particularly in terms of how the client perceives themselves, others, issues and their situation. In this sense, the coach is acting as a sounding board and a mirror, enabling the client to grow in awareness of his or her own world view. The coach will go on to focus on specific tensions that may emerge, for instance, between the client's underlying beliefs and values, and the stances or actions they are choosing in practice.⁷

The intention here is to surface the client's underlying personal and cultural metaphysic, rather than simply his or her way of perceiving and responding to an immediate issue. This approach is based on a belief that the client's general world view or stance-in-the-world will influence, for example, what issues the client perceives as significant; how they perceive, experience and evaluate them; what their subjective needs and aspirations are; what approaches and actions they will consider valid or appropriate; what actions they will be prepared to commit to and sustain etc.² This approach also

“

One of the goals of existential coaching is... to raise world view and choice into awareness, in order to enable clients to live more authentic lives



enables the client to explore any tensions within their world view, between that world view and those of others in their situation and between their world view and their actions.

The problem with the language of 'world view' in describing such an approach is that it sounds too conscious, too cognitive, too coherent. The focus of existential coaching is profoundly subjective and phenomenological, that is, how the client actually experiences and responds to his or her being-in-the-world at the deepest psychological levels. In that sense, it's as much about how a person feels, the questions they struggle with and what they sense intuitively, as what they may think or believe rationally.³ Again, there are important links for me with a spiritual dimension. As I faced my own health-related tests, for instance, I experienced my faith in God as something far more like a deep, intuitive, mysterious, inner 'knowing', than a rational assent to a set of beliefs.⁸

As the conversation progresses, the coach may help the client to identify choices he or she is making (including by default), potential choices he or she could take in the future, and how to integrate the client's choices with his or her chosen being and stance in the world, in order to live a more authentic and thereby less conflicted life. At one level, this enables the client to become more aware of and honest about their decisions and actions, and to act with a greater sense of freedom and responsibility. At another level, it opens up more opportunities for the future than the client may have perceived previously. It can feel very liberating and energising to discover fresh ways of perceiving and acting in situations that have previously felt stuck or entrapping.⁹

Sample coaching methods could involve helping the client reframe experiences as choices or to change their language from passive to active voice. For example, 'I have to write this report for my boss by Friday' or 'This report needs to be written by Friday', sound and feel less empowering than, 'I will choose to write this report for my boss by Friday'. It enables the client to take ownership of their choices and to weigh up alternative courses of action. After all, if it's a choice, I can choose differently, although I will need to weigh up the relative pros and cons of different choices. My best choices are congruent with my underlying beliefs and values, for example, in this case, respect for authority, the sense of a job well done, or a desire to keep my job so I can pay my bills.⁴

Reflection

I will end here by posing some brief existential coaching questions as prompts:

- Which aspects of your life feel the most meaningful and purposeful for you at the moment?
- What activities most ignite a sense of aliveness and presence in your everyday experiences?
- How do you envision your ideal life, and what steps can you take to move towards that vision?
- What does relationship mean to you, whether to yourself, to God or to other people or things?
- How do you deal with feelings of existential anxiety, or the fear of aloneness or the unknown?
- Are there any recurring patterns or beliefs that may be limiting your growth or fulfilment?
- What legacy do you wish to leave behind, and how does it impact your current decision making?
- How do you cope with the concept of mortality, and does it affect the way you live your life?
- In what ways can you take more responsibility for shaping your own life and finding purpose? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nick Wright is psychological coach, trainer and organisation development

consultant who works with people and teams in beyond-profit sectors (charities; international non-governmental organisations; public sector organisations; churches) in the UK and internationally. He has a postgraduate diploma in psychological coaching and a masters degree in organisation development. He specialises in cross-cultural working and critical reflective practice.

Web: www.nick-wright.com

Email: info@nick-wright.com

This article includes material previously published on the author's website as blog posts, dated 17 February 2013 and 22 July 2023.

REFERENCES

- 1 Popova M. Viktor Frankl on the human search for meaning. *The Marginalian*. 26 March 2013. [Online] www.themarginalian.org/2013/03/26/viktor-frankl-mans-search-for-meaning/ (Accessed 13 February 2024).
- 2 Gendlin E. *Befindlichkeit*: Heidegger and the philosophy of psychology. *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry*: Heidegger and Psychology 1978-79; XVI: 1-3.
- 3 Jacob Y. *Existential coaching*. London: Routledge; 2019.
- 4 Glasser W. *Counselling with choice theory*. New York: Harper Collins; 2000.
- 5 Van Deurzen E, Adams M. *Skills in existential counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage; 2010.
- 6 Hanaway M. *An existential approach to leadership challenges*. London: Routledge; 2020.
- 7 Hanaway M. *The handbook of existential coaching practice*. London: Routledge; 2020.
- 8 Matthew I. *The impact of God*. London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1995.
- 9 Van Deurzen E, Hanaway M. *Existential perspectives on coaching*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2012.