



# **Existential Coaching**

## **An Introduction**

**Nick Wright**

# Existential Coaching

I once had precautionary tests for a potentially life-threatening condition. 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 enabling a person to explore what it means to be in the world and to face what choices that presents. It can be a bit like revealing and repainting the pictures of our lives with everything, potentially, anew.

At times, a sudden shift in awareness can feel mysterious, unfathomable, disorientating and anxiety-provoking. It can be like 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?'

According to existentialist thought, our essence as a person isn't fixed but we become who we are through the choices we make. Our choices are influenced by factors such as the assumptions, beliefs, judgements, hopes and fears etc. we hold about ourselves, the same we hold about others and how we experience and act in our relationships with others, in whatever circumstances we face.

Existentialist writers sometimes refer to this central idea of choice, decision and action as our 'stance in the world', that is, how we perceive, position ourselves and choose to act in our everyday lives. Our stance both reflects our way of being in the world, and shapes who we are and will become in the world. I can share an example from personal experience to illustrate this phenomenon.

When my youngest daughter was 7 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, then climb the long staircase that led to the top before throwing herself down its harrowing slope. After she had done it, I asked how she had managed to bring herself to push herself off its terrifying edge: a literal leap of faith.

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.'

# Existential Coaching

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. We are often, too, unaware of the underlying metaphysical world view we hold that both influences and is influenced by our choices. We can choose to live at a superficial level as a form of personal or social defence against anxiety, or as a life-coping mechanism.

A problem is that if we only and always live at that 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.

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 often about supporting clients to acknowledge and deal with underlying anxieties, tensions and conflicts that could be experienced symptomatically in psychological, emotional, physical or relational difficulties, or in problematic patterns of behaviour.

Emily van Duerzen summarises this approach in *Skills in Existential Counselling & Psychotherapy* (2011) as, 'to help people to get better at facing up to difficulties with courage instead of running away from them'. 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 doing in the world.

This reminds me of a volunteer assignment I did with a deeply profound Christian social worker and psychologist 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.

# Existential Coaching

The groups provided these young people with a much-needed sense of identity, belonging and purpose in the world. When working with such young people, the social worker would touch sensitively on spiritual issues and questions where it seemed appropriate. A secular humanistic colleague challenged him vehemently on this, insisting that social workers should never stray into the spirituality arena.

The social worker 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 social worker responded, 'These young people often talk in therapy about their deep fears, life and death, as 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 political groups. We cannot afford to separate our thinking or our practice into neat, distinct, spheres of concern or influence. The matters they, and we, are dealing with bring profound psychosocial, existential and spiritual issues face-to-face in the room.' I agreed. His colleague fell silent and left the room.

So, what could existential coaching look like in practice? Here are some insights and ideas from my own experience:

Firstly, the coach may invite the client to share his or her story, focusing particularly on issues that led them to work with a coach 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 might surface implicitly or explicitly in the client's account, especially in terms of how the client perceives and experiences him- or herself, others, issues and their situation.

In doing this, the coach is acting as a sounding board and a mirror, revealing the client to him- or herself, enabling the client to grow in awareness of his or her own world view and stance-in-the-world. The coach may then go on to focus on any specific tensions that might emerge, e.g. between the client's underlying beliefs and values and the decisions and actions they are choosing in practice.

# Existential Coaching

The intention is to surface the client's underlying personal and cultural metaphysic, and not simply his or her way of perceiving and responding to an immediate issue. It is based on a belief that the client's stance-in-the-world will influence, for instance, what issues the client perceives as significant; how they perceive, experience and evaluate them; what their subjective needs and aspirations are; what approaches they will consider valid or appropriate; what actions they will be prepared to commit to and sustain etc.

This approach creates opportunity for the client to explore any tensions, for instance within their own 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, however, that it sounds too conscious, too cognitive, too coherent. The focus of existential coaching is profoundly subjective and phenomenological. It pays attention to how the client actually experiences and responds to his or her being-in-the-world at the deepest psychological and emotional levels.

In that sense, it's as much about how a person is feeling, the questions they are struggling with and what they are sensing intuitively, as what they may be thinking or believing rationally. Again, there are important links for me with a spiritual dimension. As I faced my own health challenge, I experienced my faith in God as something more like a subconscious, mysterious, inner 'knowing' than a rational assent to a set of beliefs.

As the coaching conversation progresses, the coach may help now the client to identify choices that he or she is making (including subconsciously, or by default), potential choices that 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. This can help the client to live a more fulfilling, authentic and, thereby, less-conflicted life.

At one level, this will enable the client to become more aware of, and sometimes more honest with themselves about, their decisions and actions and to act with a greater sense of freedom and responsibility. At another level, it can open up more opportunities for the future than the client may have imagined previously. It can feel very liberating and energising to discover fresh ways of being and acting in situations and relationships that have previously felt deeply stuck, inauthentic or entrapping.

# Existential Coaching

A useful coaching method can be to challenge the client to reframe experiences as choices, or to change their language from passive to active voice. For instance, 'I have to write this report for my boss by Friday' or, 'This report needs to be written by Friday' can sound and feel far less empowering than, 'I choose to write this report for my boss and I'll do it by Friday.' It increases sense of freedom and agency.

If it's a choice, I can choose differently, although clearly 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, e.g. 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 and support my family. The coach can help a client to connect their choices with their underlying world view.

A common technique used to do this is the '7 whys' technique, whereby each time the client explains why they are choosing a certain course of action, the coach responds with, '...and why is that important to you?' until the client's deepest values, aspirations and anxieties surface and can be, therefore, addressed.

I will end this piece by posing some brief existential questions for personal reflection:

- ♣ Who am I?
- ♣ What's my purpose?
- ♣ What stance am I willing to take in the world?
- ♣ What is God calling me to do with my life?
- ♣ How consistent are my choices with my values?
- ♣ How well do my actions reflect and reinforce the person I aspire to be?
- ♣ How do I handle anxiety, uncertainty and paradox?

# Nick Wright

Nick Wright is a psychological coach, trainer and organisation development (OD) consultant with 25+ years' experience of working with beyond-profit leaders and organisations in the UK and internationally.

Nick has a Postgraduate Diploma in Coaching Psychology, a Masters' Degree in Human Resource Development, a Degree in Theology, a Diploma in Pastoral Studies and a Certificate in Supervision and Consultation.

Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or to work with a coach, or would be interested to enhance your own coaching insights and practice, see:

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