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Freedom, Responsibility
and the Meaning of Being



Existential Well-being Counseling

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Experiential exercise: Existential well-being

- I will offer you a few questions so that you can capture a little bit of the salience of existential well-being in your life.
- We start with friendly and welcoming attention in the middle of your body, giving yourself good company and listening, the same as you would give support and empathy to your best friend.

Visualize your life as it is for the present time and ask yourself the question:

1. **“Who am I?”**

Take notice of all possible answers that pop into you. Repeat the sentence “I am...” with several statements.

You should have at least ten statements that say something about you or what you feel like to identify with.

2. In what do you invest your time, energy, money ?

3. About what are you worrying in your life ?

4. What gives you joy, pleasure, happiness, peace, strength, courage in your life ?

Dimensions of human existence



- Physical
- Social
- Psychological
- Spiritual

Physical dimension





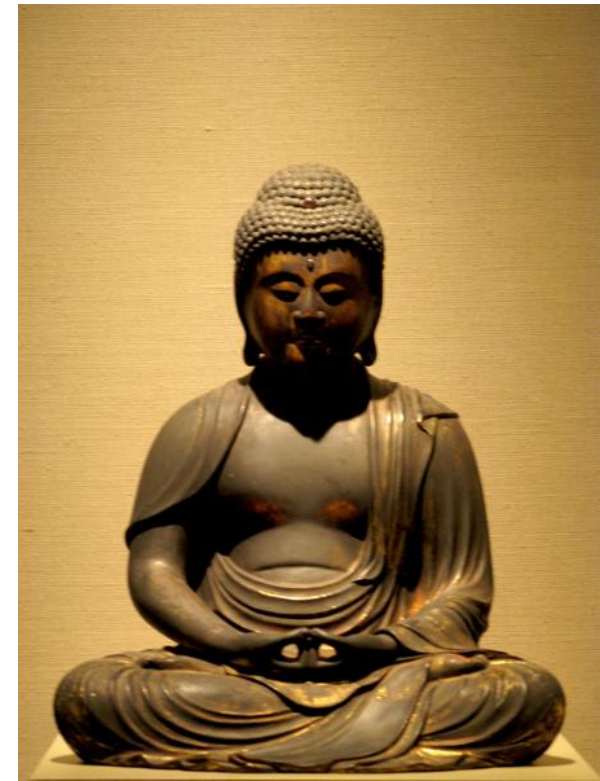
Social dimension





Psychological dimension

Spiritual dimension



Dimensions of Human Existence

(Leijssen, 2014; van Deurzen, 2009)

| | Physical | Social | Psychological | Spiritual |
|--|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Deals with I AM ... | Body Material world Nature | Place in society Relations | Identity character traits Thinking and feeling | Soul Meaning Self-transcending ideals |
| Values ENERGY, time, money | Health Safety Comfort | Esteem, succes Connection | Autonomy Freedom Knowledge Authenticity | A better world, Consciousness of unity 'Being values' |
| Threats WORRIES | Pain, sickness Death Poverty | Rejection Loneliness Guilt, shame | Confusion Doubt Imperfection | Meaninglessness Futility Evil |
| JOY Perennial philosophy | BEAUTY | GOODNESS | TRUTH | LOVE |

Essential principles of existential well-being

1. Complexity of human existence: physical, social, psychological, spiritual.
2. Existential well-being implies sufficient attention for each dimension, not too much, not too little.

3. The starting point is experiential:
focusing on the bodily felt meaning.

4. Integration of diverse
humanistic/existential theories and
spiritual traditions.

5. Positive Psychology.

A process-oriented approach to human strengths, talents and virtues.

It should not be understood as a call to ignore negative aspects of human experience. But rather how positive and negative experiences may be interrelated.

Gendlin: *“Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness.”*

“The ability of human beings to form loving bonds is possibly one of their greatest strengths.”

(Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002)



Example of a strength

Love = connection in different dimensions

- ❖ *Physical*: being part of nature; respecting and enjoying the body and its needs; connection with the material/physical world.
- ❖ *Social*: authentic connection with others; genuine commitment to social tasks.
- ❖ *Psychological*: connection with oneself; self-knowledge; self-acceptance; rich inner life.
- ❖ *Spiritual*: connection to something that transcends the limited self; love as being.

Case example from psychotherapy

- Performance anxiety brings a young woman to therapy. Whenever she is asked to play music in public, her hands start shaking so badly that she is no longer able to play the piano.
- How can it be helpful to address different dimensions of human existence?

Physical dimension

- We explore how in her self-experience she locks herself up in the physical dimension when she starts fearing that her hands will not be able to find the right keys.

Social dimension

- In the social dimension she recognizes that during her childhood playing music was her way of having a relationship with her grandmother who was a musician as well. Actually she has no need whatsoever for the admiration of an audience for her musical talent.

Psychological dimension

- In the psychological dimension she experiences music as a game in which she can express her emotions and fully indulge when she is alone. It is an important source of satisfaction and expression of her inner world.

Spiritual dimension

- A dramatic change occurred when the client can experience how she would feel from a spiritual perspective if she imagined that she 'may' play music for an audience. She suddenly felt that the beauty of music was a universal gift that filled her with gratitude.

A week after this session, she reported about a performance during which she had imagined that her 'Selfless Self' was playing and singing through her.

This performance had become a peak experience during which the audience no longer appeared to be a critical judging ear, but a supporting presence.

Ever since that moment, her performance anxiety had completely disappeared.

Experiential exercise

Addressing a specific situation
or a problem from different
dimensions of human existence.

Illustration: Migraine

- How does the migraine affects you as a *physical* being?
- “I’m no longer able to move. I lose my vitality. The chronic pain shapes my life.”
- How does it affect you if you could stay in a friendly way with your body that suffers?
- “It brings tenderness and a feeling of relief.”

- How does the migraine affects you as a *social* being?
- “I learned from generation to generation to hide the pain and just go on working.”
- How does it affect you when other people acknowledge that migraine is a real suffering?
- “It makes it less shameful. Less isolated. It restores the connection with others. It means that I’m no more pushed to hide my personal feelings.”

- So we move naturally to the *psychological* dimension. What are your most dominant personal feelings?
- “Hopelessness.”
- In what way is your hope cut down by the migraine?
- “I always hope something helpful will come from the outside, like new medication. Every time I hope: this will work. And then it doesn’t. I’m so naive. I trust in something which is outside me, not in me.”

- Then the *spiritual* dimension is invited by asking: In what do you really trust?
- “My first feeling is: I have no idea!”
- Take your time to sense how your body reacts to this question. What is your felt sense about what you can trust?
- “I trust that the seasons in nature have an order. After the winter, the spring will come. When I’m gardening, I feel trust. There is order in life, something bigger than my life.”
- “When I sense that, I can feel also the order in my life. I’m part of nature. That’s really helpful. That brings relief and lightness.”

References

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Thank you

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www.existentialwellbeing.com