

Humanistic and Existential Therapies

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“Humanistic and existential psychotherapies use a wide range of approaches to case conceptualization, therapeutic goals, intervention strategies, and research methodologies. They are united by an emphasis on understanding human experience and a focus on the client rather than the symptom. Psychological problems ... are viewed as the result of inhibited ability to make authentic, meaningful, and self-directed choices about how to live. Consequently, interventions are aimed at increasing client self-awareness and self-understanding. The key words for [humanistic](#) therapy are *acceptance and growth* [and] the major themes of [existential](#) therapy are client *responsibility and freedom*. Humanistic and existential approaches share a belief that people have the capacity for self-awareness and choice. However, the two schools come to this belief through different theories:

- *Humanistic*. “The humanistic perspective views human nature as basically good, with an inherent potential to maintain healthy, meaningful relationships and to make choices that are in the interest of oneself and others. The humanistic therapist focuses on helping people free themselves from disabling assumptions and attitudes so they can live fuller lives. The therapist emphasizes growth and self-actualization rather than curing diseases or alleviating disorders. This perspective targets present conscious processes rather than unconscious processes and past causes, but like the existential approach, it holds that people have an inherent capacity for responsible self-direction. For the humanistic therapist, not being one’s true self is the source of problems. The therapeutic relationship serves as a vehicle or context in which the process of psychological growth is fostered. The humanistic therapist tries to create a therapeutic relationship that is warm and accepting and that trusts that the client’s inner drive is to actualize in a healthy direction.”
- *Existential*. “The existentialist, on the other hand, is more interested in helping the client find philosophical meaning in the face of anxiety by choosing to think and act authentically and responsibly” and by fully embracing the consequences of choices made in the past. “According to existential therapy, the central problems people face are embedded in anxiety over loneliness, isolation, despair, and, ultimately, death. Creativity, love, authenticity, and free will are recognized as potential avenues toward transformation, enabling people to live meaningful lives in the face of uncertainty and suffering. Everyone suffers losses (e.g., friends die, relationships end), and these losses are a potential cause for psychological distress because they remind us of human limitations and death.” Existential therapy assumes the belief that people’s sources of psychological discomfort come from not fully embracing the freedom to make choices, accepting the consequences of those choices, and creating meaning out of life’s inevitable losses and suffering. [[SAMHSA, 2012, pp. 105-106](#)].