An existential perspective on resilience: An overview of the research literature

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Background: Resilience is about the existential question how individuals are able to cope with difficult situations in life. This presentation will discuss resilience from an existential perspective.

Method: Four systematic studies will be discussed. First, the author will describe the fundamental existential model of resilience, based on a discussion between more than 30 international experts in existentialism. Second, a systematic review of the psychological literature will empirically validate the six main assumptions of this existential model. Third, the author will present an existential-therapeutic model of how resilience can be improved via psychological interventions, based on a questionnaire study in more than 1000 existential therapists world-wide. Fourth, a systematic literature review and meta-analyses of 42 studies will show how and to which extent existential-therapeutic interventions can increase resilience in different groups of clients.

Results: Although opinions between experts differ, the existential model of resilience consists of six main assumptions. 1. All human beings can experience ‘universal givens of existence’ such as freedom of choice and inevitably facing limitations and challenges in life. 2. Individuals can immediately experience these givens in their daily life, but this awareness often evokes existential moods, such as death anxiety, existential guilt, isolation, urgency, nausea, absurdity, boredom, and meaninglessness. 3. Individuals often defend themselves against these givens and moods, via denial and avoidance; however they also have the ability to become aware of the fact that they are denying and avoiding these existential givens; this awareness often comes as a shock when a traumatic undeniable event happens like 9/11 or facing a cancer diagnosis. 4. The denial and avoidance of the existential givens and moods seems driven by existential needs, such as the human needs for meaning, certainty, structure, and freedom in life. 5. Depending on their existential skills and life experiences, individuals can learn to accept life’s adversities and uncertainties, and to develop a dual awareness of both the need for denial/avoidance and the given reality of life’s challenges. 6. Distress, psychopathology and a wish for psychotherapeutic help are often the result of ineffective existential coping styles, such as rigidly denying the existential givens, moods and defence mechanisms. For instance the need for psychotherapeutic help in cancer patients can be explained by their underlying existential needs and skills. These six assumptions are strongly supported by psychological literature, in particular by cognitive laboratory research about Terror Management Theory, and the updated stress-coping model which includes existential coping. Individuals can be supported in accepting the existential givens, moods and defence mechanisms, via existential-therapeutic interventions. As an international questionnaire study shows, existential-therapeutic practices often consist of phenomenological methods, relational practices, and directly addressing the givens of existence. A review of 42 scientific trials indicates that existential therapies show moderate to large effects on experiencing positive meaning, reducing the levels of distress and psychopathology, increasing self-efficacy and bio-immunological functioning. In particular therapies that directly address meaning in life help cancer-patients to live a meaningful, self-efficacious life despite their physical and existential limitations; these effects are similar or larger than other psycho-oncological therapies.

Discussion: Resilience seems to be at the heart of existentialism, although it is often not explicitly called ‘resilience’. This opens new roads for future multidisciplinary research on existential resilience.

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