

THE FIRM AND GENTLE OF EXISTENTIAL PRACTICE: A GROUP TRAINING EXERCISE

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Supplementary material for *Existential Therapies: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2014), Chapter 4.

The following exercise needs to be carried out in a group or training context, in which there are appropriate boundaries and support systems in place. The exercise is *not* about instructing you on how to work, but about using the training context to explore ways of practising that may be different from what you normally do.

Aim

- To help you explore the relative merits of firmer and gentler existential practices.
- To help you identify ways of working that may be less familiar to you.

The exercise

- Form a group of three (triad).
- Identify one person who will be the speaker/client. Ideally, this should be someone who is currently facing a significant choice in their life and is, perhaps, a little avoidant in facing up to this (exercise 4.2 can be a useful means of identifying who this might be). It is imperative, however, that the client feels robust enough to talk about, and be challenged on, this.
- Identify a second person who will be the *gentler* existential therapist. Their role will be to:
 - Gently encourage the client to talk about their decision
 - Be empathic and supportive in the anxiety they might be experiencing
 - Help them think through the different options.
 - The third person will be the *firmer* existential therapist. Their role will be to:
 - Challenge the client to face up to their choices
 - Point out to them any ways in which they seem to be avoiding their freedom, choice or responsibility
 - Encourage them to see that ‘not choosing’ is a choice in itself
 - Encourage them to move towards making a decision (even if it is decision to postpone a decision).
 - Be firm, insistent, and challenging (*but* to remain non-judgemental and empathic--this is not an excuse to start insulting colleagues!)

In deciding who will be the firmer and gentler existential therapist, think about doing the opposite of what you are more familiar with: so if you tend to be quite gentle in your work, have a go about being the firmer therapist, and vice versa.

Begin the session. The client can work with the therapists either at the same time or one after the other, but the following order tends to work well:

- Gentler therapist and client work together, firmer therapist is observer (5 mins)
- Firmer therapist and client work together, gentler therapist is observer (5 mins) (don't start the session again, just carry on from where the softer therapist left off)
- Both therapists work with the client, inputting as and when they feel is appropriate from their respective roles (10 mins).
- Debrief (in triads and/or the whole group). Key questions are:

- Which of the therapeutic stances were most helpful (particularly from the perspective of the client)?
- How did the therapists find it enacting the different roles?

Comment

Having run this exercise numerous times on training courses, my experience is that participants generally find it quite fun. It is not uncommon to hear triads bursting into laughter, as the firmer and gentler therapists start tussling with each other over how to engage with the client. This is generally fine as the whole point of the exercise is to play around and to try things out, but it is essential that due care is paid to the wellbeing of all participants, particularly the clients.

From feedback, it is evident that different clients find different styles of working more or less helpful: some like the firmer interventions; others prefer a more empathic, supportive style. What many of the clients state, however, is that they actually liked *both* styles, particularly in combination, with the empathy and support of the gentler therapist helping them to hear the challenges that the firmer therapists were offering. For therapists who are used to working in very nondirective ways, this can be particularly illuminating: that there may be more scope to challenge and confront clients than they assumed.

Variations

If there is more time, each participant can try out each role; or harder and softer therapist can swap roles at some point.