



# The Role of Spirituality in Existential Confrontation with a Case Study

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## Abstract

This study deals with existential psychotherapy from the perspective of Rollo May and Irvin Yalom; it includes the concepts of death, freedom, meaning, responsibility, and loneliness. Furthermore, an existential approach is an approach that cares about cultural sensitivity and works with its clients from this perspective. When it comes to sensitivity to culture, it is almost impossible not to talk about religion and spirituality. Spirituality has been an increasingly found field in literature in recent years. In addition, it is an indisputable fact that the spiritual resources of the client should be investigated, the spiritual and religious dimensions of the clients should be studied in the psychological counseling process, and sustainable coping mechanisms should be developed. When the literature is examined, it is seen that there are insufficient studies on how to deal with spirituality in the psychological counseling process in terms of existential theory. For this reason, this study aims to address the perspectives of existentialist philosophers on spirituality, to reveal the relationship between spirituality and existential psychology, to bring a spiritual perspective to existential psychological counseling processes on this ground, and to offer technical and process suggestions to the field workers. For this purpose, relevant literature information, existential spiritually oriented counseling principles and techniques, evaluations, suggestions in the conclusion, a case example, and formulations of this case are included in the study. With the given titles, a unique perspective is presented to spiritually oriented counseling practices from an existential perspective, and existential techniques are adapted to the culture.

## Keywords:

Existential psychotherapy • spirituality • psychological counseling

## Vaka Örneği ile Varoluşsal Yüzleşmelerde Maneviyatın Rolü

## Öz

Varoluşçu psikoterapiyi Rollo May ve Irvin Yalom bakış açısı ile ele alan bu çalışma; ölümlü, özgürlük, anlam, sorumluluk ve yalnızlık kavramlarını barındırmaktadır. Ayrıca varoluşçu yaklaşım kültüre duyarlılığı önemseyen ve danışanları ile bu perspektiften çalışan bir yaklaşımdır. Kültüre duyarlılık söz konusu olduğunda din ve maneviyatın söz konusu olmaması hemen hemen olanaksızdır. Maneviyat kavramı ise son yıllarda artan şekilde kendisine literatürde yer bulmaktadır. Ayrıca danışanın manevi kaynaklarının araştırılması, danışanların manevi ve dini boyutlarının psikolojik danışmanlık sürecinde çalışılması ve sürdürülebilir baş etme mekanizmalarının geliştirilmesi gerekliliği su götürmez bir gerçektir. Alan yazın incelendiğinde varoluşçu kuram açısından özellikle maneviyatın psikolojik danışmanlık sürecinde nasıl ele alınacağı ile ilgili çalışmaların yetersiz olduğu görülmektedir. Bu sebeple bu çalışmada; varoluşçu filozofların maneviyata bakış açılarını ele almak, maneviyat ve varoluşçu psikoloji ilişkisini ortaya koymak, bu zeminde varoluşçu psikolojik danışmanlık süreçlerine manevi bir bakış açısı getirmek, ve alan çalışanlarına bu konuda teknik ve süreç önerileri sunmak amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaca yönelik olarak çalışmanın içerisinde ilgili literatür bilgilerine, varoluşçu manevi yönelimli psikolojik danışma ilke ve tekniklerine, sonuç kısmında değerlendirme ve önerilere, bir vaka örneğine ve bu vakanın formülasyonlarına yer verilmiştir. Verilen başlıklarla manevi yönelimli psikolojik danışma uygulamalarına varoluşçu perspektiften özgün bir bakış açısı sunulmaktadır ve varoluşçu tekniklerin kültüre uyarlanmış hali yer almaktadır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler:

Varoluşçu psikoterapi • maneviyat • psikolojik danışma

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Since the day human descended to the earth, human has asked questions about his/her existence and tried to understand why they exist. This questioning process has brought with it concepts such as loneliness, the search for meaning, and responsibility. This philosophical process, in which questions, not answers, arise and gain meaning, has been the subject of existential philosophy in terms of the subjects it deals with. Thinkers who questioned existentialism contributed to the development of existential philosophy. In the following lines, existential philosophy, existentialist philosophers, and the philosophical history of existentialism will be explained to better understand the existential psychotherapy processes.

The human being is a being thrown into this world. Humans must face the things they will experience and the annihilation that their existence brings them (Heidegger, 2019). This confrontation process raises many questions. To talk about existentialism, it will be necessary to talk about existence first. According to existential thinkers, the words to be, to exist and to be in the moment do not have the same meaning. A thing can only show its existence when it finds a response in the mental world. However, it is almost impossible to question the existence and reach a clear conclusion, since a person cannot go to a field other than this mental comprehension. In other words, to question and think about existence, it is necessary to look at the thing that is thought from a certain distance, but since he cannot put this distance on anything whose existence is questioned, there cannot be an objective questioning. Everything whose existence is questioned certainly carries a piece of the questioner (Foulque, 1995; Taşdelen, 2004; Yalom, 2011). In summary, nothing in which existential inquiries are made can be independent of one's way of evaluating the world.

The existing process is also the concept that distinguishes human existence, which means consciousness, spirit, freedom, and self, from other beings in terms of existence. According to Heidegger, a lonely human who is in the middle of existence, thanks to this loneliness meaning, builds the existence area where he belongs. (Taşdelen, 2004). The process of a human trying to understand his/her existence in the face of the real world; is described as an experience in the books *The Stranger* written by Camus and *Nausea* written by Sartre. Human experiences existential crisis with loneliness and alienation (Camus, 2019; Sartre, 2019). Heidegger, on the other hand, defines this process as a state of distress that people experience (Özcan, 2016). Sartre, who adds a new dimension to the view that the loneliness of the person, which is thought to be a part of this state of distress, deepens his despair, accepts that people are alone, but does not agree with the idea that they are helpless and in a dead end. He says that a conscious person will get rid of despair by taking responsibility for his actions and thus becoming free (Spengler, 1997). However, he adds that this process is a process of anxiety (Sartre, 2019). The therapy/psychological counseling process creates a safe ground for the questioning of the person trying to show oneself that a human

exists, the anxieties that arise because of a human's confrontation with death, and the search for meaning that will reveal human existence. The psychological counseling process is like the reflection of the experience process mentioned by Camus and Sartre. While the individual questions human existence in this experience, the human experiences taking responsibility by confronting human anxiety and loneliness, and thus enjoys freedom. In addition, in the process of psychological counseling, the opinion emerges that under no circumstances can a person evaluate a person's existence from an objective point of view. Both the therapist and the client influence each other. Therefore, since the existence of both the therapist and the client is discussed in counseling environments, the way both parties question the process gains a great deal of meaning.

The spirituality that emerges between the counselor and the client, who questions their meanings and faces death and loneliness becomes the subject of the session directly. However, since this study will include how to work with religious and spiritual issues with the client in existential counseling rather than spirituality, it is important to know and evaluate the perspectives of existential thinkers on spirituality.

When it comes to religion and spirituality, one of the first things that comes to mind is belief in God. The views and beliefs of God that a person has directly affected the way of existence of that person. For this reason, there are differences between the thinkers who accept the existence of God and those who reject it in terms of interpretation of existence (Magill, 1992).

If we look at the thinkers who accept the existence of God, Dostoevsky, one of the existentialist thinkers and writers, is one of the first to express the emphasis on God in existence. According to Dostoevsky, what restrains humans in their free life, which is limited by death, is the conflicts within. Arguing that the restraint arising from these conflicts is related to religion, he says, "if God did not exist everything would be permitted." With this sentence, he mentions that if there is no religion, the system of stopping oneself will be shaken. Because a human is not a being who can direct actions according to others or the environment (Ritter, 1954). Tillich and Buber, who shaped Rollo May's thoughts, also state that there is a God, a being who watches what they do, he sometimes supports them, and they are in contact with this supreme being (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2017). Another thinker who emphasizes God and says that the existence of a person can only be realized with the existence of a God is Karl Jaspers. Jaspers, who argues that humans can experience the freedom to the fullest by accepting the existence of God, argues that God is a "transcendence" that has ceased to be a church God and spread all over the world (Jaspers, 1997). Spirituality also comes into play here. Spirituality feeds heavily on religious language, and some existential thinkers (especially Kieerkegard) link spirituality more to religion. However, here is

spirituality; it is formulated as a world of values, beliefs, transcendence, and making sense of life (Webster 2004; Van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker 2005). Because today, spirituality is considered a broader concept than religion (Pargament, 1999). According to Jaspers, a person has a series of questions to answer, the ground slips under his feet and therefore people are uneasy, people face many problems that they must solve in this insecure place, the future is insecure. This insecurity pushes people to seek meaning. To evaluate this meaning-making process, human existence should be considered (Jaspers, 1997). While questioning existence, Jaspers (1997) describes three types of existence: the world, me, and God. Depending on these, the types of thought appear as wisdom, philosophy, and theology. According to Jaspers (1997), existence cannot be separated from concepts such as God, transcendent beings, and theology. Considering these views, a religion that provides communication with God and emerging spirituality is a part of existence. For this reason, on this philosophical ground, spirituality can be considered a resource in existential psychotherapy processes and spirituality can be studied from an existential point of view in the counseling process.

### **Relationship between Existential Psychology and Spirituality**

With the increase in research on spirituality in recent years, opinions on psychology theories from a spiritual perspective have also begun to find a place in the literature. In terms of psychotherapies, it is a well-known fact that the process should be carried out in a culturally sensitive manner (Bektaş, 2006). Existential therapists also encourage culturally sensitive adaptation of this therapy method. Because they argue that the flexibility of the existential perspective and its ability to take shape is suitable for this (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2017). The existential perspective, which also emphasizes the spiritual dimension among the dimensions of life, does not reject this dimension of the human being. In this direction, the religious beliefs and spiritual aspects of the clients who come to psychotherapy should not be ignored, and the principles of the spiritually oriented counseling process should be used, when necessary, in order to carry out the process with these clients (Dilen, 2019). Since the existential psychotherapy approach is predominantly philosophical, there has been a need to conduct field research on spiritually oriented counseling from an existential perspective within the framework of basic philosophy, to draw the framework for the counseling process, to adapt the techniques, and to present case examples. In the following lines, based on this need, information about religious and spiritual-oriented psychological counseling will be given from an existential perspective.

Some aspects related to spiritually oriented-existential counseling preoccupy the minds of the field workers. There are different views on the association with religion, which causes this confusion. Regarding this, Yalom (2000) states: “There is a complex and tense relationship between Existential Psychotherapy and religion. But they are

cousins from common ancestors who have similar anxieties,” he says, revealing this complexity. Carey and Eschbach (2003) put forward the following views on the basic concepts of existentialism and religious beliefs:

Yalom (2001) observed that in the face of death, people want to do something with their lives. However, an eternal world and belief in the creator are effective in discovering the meaning of death. On the other hand, Yalom says that he only wants to make sense of the part that we live and know and to remind the fact that we are finite beings, even though we desire eternity. A person wants freedom throughout one’s life but also avoids facing freedom. However, the world is narrow for those who have criteria of freedom limited to humans. People feel the need to be liberated and connected at the same time. However, for the person who is not completely satisfied with the connection with people, there is a need for a connection in which humans can connect and accept in every way (Yalom, 2001).

Yalom (2018) underlines the effect of religion in the process of coping with existential concerns. According to Yalom (1998), humans find solace in a being who watches and protects them, and who promises them an eternal union through religion. However, Yalom (2018) underlined that religion, which connects man with God, and spirituality (unlike Kierkegaard) are not the same thing. Cornett (1998) expresses a similar view: “Spirituality is such a broad and ambiguous concept that it often frightens those who place it in the context of a discussion.” Van Deurzen (1997) also agrees with them, saying that confessing atheism or agnosticism does not necessarily imply the absence of a meaning and value system at the basis of one’s existence. Yalom (1998), while describing the basic conflicts of human beings in the titles of death, freedom (which includes responsibility), isolation, and meaning, he entered the concept of God and spiritual resources, although not very deeply. And he states that people are nourished by spirituality while coping with these conflicts. When this view is interpreted, God is a being that human beings accept unconditionally and can be connected to at any time. Consequently, when people face freedom and loneliness, they can regulate these concerns with their belief in God. While religion brings spirituality, spirituality is a broader concept. Being in touch with religion and spirituality, using both as a resource, and deepening the conflicts related to both will be both liberating for humans and a balm for human helplessness.

While research on spirituality is still ongoing, although a clear framework has not been drawn, four basic themes related to spirituality have been identified in the research: existential reality, transcendence, connectedness, and power/force/energy (Chiu et al., 2004). When looking at spirituality in this context, the following views have been proposed: (i) Spirituality involves thinking about fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of one’s life, (ii) Spirituality includes the search for sustainable,

transcendent values, (iii) Spirituality is relational and includes the search for connection with others and the world, (iv) Spirituality may or may not include belief in a God and/or institutional religion, (v) Spirituality may include wonder and experiential moments of awe, transcendence, peak experiences, and flow, (vi) Spirituality may or may not be (Ronkainen et al., 2015; Watson and Nesti 2005). In addition to all these, spiritually oriented-psychological counseling is one of the results of the search for meaning, because spirituality is defined as the search for meaning, value, and purpose in one's life (Özdoğan, 2006). Seeking meaning and purpose in life and aiming to live according to basic personal beliefs are considered spirituality (Neck and Milliman 1994). The spirituality-based process can also be evaluated within the scope of the search for meaning (Dilen, 2019). Puchalski and Romer (2000) defined spirituality as "that which allows one to experience transcendent meaning in life". According to another view, it is a structure that includes the concepts of spirituality, belief, and (or) meaning. Faith is a belief in a higher transcendent power, not necessarily defined as God, and does not need to be achieved through the rituals or beliefs of an organized religion (Brady et al., 1999; Karasu, 1999; Breitbart et al., 2004). According to another view, spirituality is the area of existence that allows the individual to connect with the world and others intimately. Looking at others beyond oneself increases self-awareness and facilitates personal development (Eliason et al., 2010).

From this perspective, it can be said that spirituality's search for meaning, search for value, state of being relational, state of influencing each other, and loneliness/isolation are related to existentialism. At the same time, since the concepts of existential psychotherapy such as freedom, responsibility, and death cannot be independent of the search for meaning, the relationship between spirituality and existential psychotherapy is undeniable. The necessary theoretical ground for the evaluation of spiritually oriented psychological counseling processes, which is one of the aims of this study, from an existential point of view has been revealed. In the literature, there are not enough studies in which the therapeutic process of existential spiritually oriented counseling is explained step by step, and clues are included. Therefore, it is crucial for the employees in the field to explain the spiritually-oriented psychological counseling process in terms of the existential approach on this theoretical ground.

### **The Therapeutic Process in Existential Spiritually Oriented Counseling and Psychotherapy**

One of the most important steps in the psychological counseling process is to set goals (Yüksel-Şahin, 2018). In this direction, the existential purpose of the psychological counseling processes to be carried out from an existential perspective is to support the clients to open ways to save them from being passive victims of the conditions and to invite them to be active participants in their lives through high awareness and responsibility. This

process helps a person to take ownership of her/his life, feelings, choices, and beliefs in a meaningful way and to establish a real relationship with herself/himself the world, and others (May, 1979;1983). In summary, the main purpose of existential therapy is to increase awareness (Bugental, 1990). To achieve this purpose, existential psychotherapy is divided into three parts (Van Deurzen, 2017): (i) *Beginning: Determining the meanings that the client attributes about oneself and the world.* How the client makes sense of existence is determined. At this stage, clients often put the responsibility on “others” and talk about how victimized they are. (ii) *Developing: Discovering the sources of clients’ current values and meanings.* At this stage, the therapist encourages the clients on a journey of discovery. At this stage, clients may find it difficult because they have to discover themselves, face some of their values and understandings, and even reconstruct them. Currently, the clients see which life choices they have made and experience awareness on awareness. (iii) *Learning and Responsibility: The client taking action and making a difference.* In this phase, the clients realize the consequences of their actions and start to take steps toward the life they wanted. The process has left the therapy room and started to integrate with general life.

A mental health professional who wants to work with an existential approach; in cases where the client brings a spiritual issue to the session, the client’s spiritual resources are strong, the client has spiritual conflicts or the client wants to work on spirituality, she/he may prefer spiritually oriented counseling. In this case, the following stages can be followed in the existential spiritually oriented counseling process: (i) *Beginning:* Identifying the subject brought by the client and investigating the meanings he/she attributes to the subject. Determining the meaning and importance of spirituality in the subject brought or coping strategies used. Investigation of the relationship of responsibility, especially with religious and spiritual elements, (ii) *Developing:* Investigation of whether spirituality is used as a resource in the ascribed meanings, the discovery of values and meanings in the process brought so far. Looking at the relationship between spirituality and meaning, confronting contradictory meanings, raising awareness, and restructuring meanings, (iii) *Learning and Responsibility:* Making choices, taking responsibility, and taking action regarding newly constructed values and meanings.

After the therapeutic process steps are planned, the client’s existence, anxiety, and responsibilities in the session room are studied through techniques. Especially in the search for meaning that emerges in spiritually-oriented counseling, standing in the right place and asking the right questions will increase awareness, which is the purpose of the process, and will raise new questions in the search for meaning.

### **Existential Spiritual-Oriented Counseling and Psychotherapy Techniques**

The existentialist psychotherapists who conducted the process did not offer a clear set of techniques, unlike the approaches before them. This is because “meaning”

comes before technique (Van Deurzen, 1997). For some reason, what will be done and applied is selected according to the phenomenological field of the client. In other words, before using the technique, the counselor should consider the client's readiness and needs and act accordingly (Van Deurzen, 1997). For this reason, it is difficult to come across clearly defined techniques. However, Yalom mentioned some exercises and practice examples in his books in which he explained his practices (Yalom, 2018). In this part of the study, adaptation examples for existential spiritually oriented counseling processes are given in light of the concepts and practice examples mentioned by Yalom (2018).

### **Loneliness and Relationship**

Humans are born alone and die alone. In the life between these two points, they make their choices alone and takes their responsibilities alone, so humans have to face loneliness throughout their life. According to Nietzsche, to transcend life, man must transcend himself. The person who transcends himself is alone. This loneliness is more than ordinary, it is valuable loneliness (Aşkan, 1996).

The clients to whom the existential approach is currently relevant are those who are overwhelmed by their loneliness (Corey, 2015). A person is alone because he/she cannot throw the responsibility on someone else, and even if he/she ignores it, he/she will even take responsibility for it. In the world of responsibilities, a person will also have to take responsibility for loneliness. In addition, facing death and freedom brings him/her loneliness (Yalom, 2018).

From the existential perspective, loneliness and isolation are interchangeable. Yalom preferred isolation. Existential isolation results from the unbridgeable distance between a person and others. Others in this definition describe both the world and people and parts within themselves. Isolation persists despite a process of integration. Only if one can face and accept his/her existential isolation can he/she turn towards others with love. Acceptance of loneliness is challenging and sometimes overwhelming. Thus, defenses are established against loneliness (Yalom, 2018). Loneliness often comes up in the therapy process. The therapist helps the client to face and accept loneliness. One of the most important factors in the process of coping with loneliness is establishing a relationship. Where there is a relationship, there is also spirituality (Eliason, et al., 2007). When two individuals meet each other, they both change. The essence of a good counseling relationship is one in which the counselor uses personal experience, self-awareness, and belief to positively influence the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. In this way, an extremely sincere and humane behavior such as being present for another person, showing empathy, and showing unconditional acceptance can be completely curative (Eliason & Smith, 2004; Rogers, 1951, 1961).

The importance given to the relationship by the existential approach takes a very strong place in spiritually oriented-counseling. The fact that spirituality is a vital component in counseling, it can be a healing force that acts on the therapist as well as the client. The relationship between the counselor/therapist and his or her spirituality also has a strong influence on the counseling process. Through the disclosures of the true self in *me* and *you* encounter, both the therapist and the client can draw their spirituality into the relationship. In this way, spirituality exists in the session room in the relationship between the client and the therapist. According to one view, even the presence of a person gives rise to spirituality (Eliason, 2000; Eliason et al., 2001, 2007). The emphasis on spirituality between the therapist and the client in these views' sheds light on the importance of the relationship in the session room in coping with loneliness in existential spiritually oriented counseling. According to existential therapy, the quality of the relationship that arises from one to the other during the session is one of the main factors that bring positive change (Corey, 2015). According to this perspective, existential therapy is a journey that the client and the therapist embark on to seek and question themselves (Vontress et al., 1999).

May (1958, 1979, 1983) rejected the impersonal techniques of Freudian analysis and invited therapists to enter the client's life. This call is in line with Yalom's (2002) view that diagnostic labeling limits vision and clinical perspective, causing the client to selectively ignore parts of the history that do not fit the diagnosis. The existential perspective has ruled out many counseling techniques because it believes it interferes with the relationship between the client and the therapist.

Yalom (2002) also talks about the importance of the relationship when a person opens oneself to another person and even the feeling of being accepted is healing. And so, nothing can prevent the relationship between the client and the therapist. The therapist should ask himself/herself the following questions about evaluating the relationship during the therapy process (Yalom, 2002):

How is our relationship with my client? What is going on between us? Is my client acting competitive, ambitious, angry, etc. with me? Does she/he accept or reject my offers of help? Is he/she skeptical or indifferent?

To evaluate the relationship, the therapist may ask the following questions to the client (Yalom, 2002):

How are you and how am I today? How do you see the field between us today? How do you think we were today? Now think half an hour ahead, how will you feel about you and me on the way home? What will be the unspoken things today?

Thanks to these questions, both the therapist and the client will evaluate the relationship between them. As mentioned above, the spirituality that existed during the relationship between two people will also be expressed in this way.

## Meaning

Victor Frankl is the person who worked in detail on meaning in existential therapy. However, in this study, the perspective on the meaning of the therapy approach of Yalom and May is explained. Humans need meaning throughout their life and seek meaning. They are almost certain that a meaningless life cannot be sustained. However, since there is no such thing as certainty in a world where people exist, there is no exact meaning. In this case, how will a being who is constantly looking for meaning cope with a world where there is no meaning? (Yalom, 2018). Debates about how a non-religious person can meet this need for meaning have continued for years. Because a system taken from people cannot be abandoned without replacing it with a new one. Philosophers and thinkers have written about living in the moment, self-realization, self-transcendence, hedonistic solution, creativity, altruism, devotion to a cause, and letting life flow for the answers to this question (Yalom, 2018). In addition to these meanings, some offer the view that people will not be satisfied without having an eternal meaning (Carey & Eschbach, 2003). In addition, Nagel mentions the importance of religion and God in the search for meaning and states that the anxiety in the search for meaning will decrease if the sources are fed. In this view, Nagel says that besides the other meanings listed, there is also a religious meaning and that the time lived in the world is the preparation for eternal life (Sezer, 2012). For people who believe in a religion or want to be fed spiritually, religious and spiritual needs have a significant place in their search for meaning (Dilen, 2019). However, the meaning of the existential therapist differs from these.

According to the existential approach, human beings and the world they live in are not independent of each other. For this reason, the physical world and the spiritual structure of human beings affect each other and create meaning. Being in this totality is called “dasein”. A person’s health depends on the power of dasein on the whole. (May, 1994). Dasein is defined as a person strengthens against the world and its contents while living (Yazgan-İnanç & Yerlikaya, 2011). With dasein, which means being here, existential philosophy bases the concept of being at the moment, because being here in the moment is existence. From this perspective, existential therapy does not focus on the problems themselves and provides a context that gives meaning to the individual’s suffering. With the understanding of one’s role in the world, or even the awareness of one’s as yet unknown role, they can gather their inner resources of resilience and dispel the impermanence of their suffering. Given the degree of trauma and conflict in the world, existential theory and its expression in counseling practice will continue to be influential (Eliason et al., 2010). What is meant here is to discover the meaning of even the problem brought by the client. The therapist should investigate what meaning the client gives to the problem brought by him. Religion and spirituality are also two concepts related to the meaning of humans. According to Yalom (1998), human beings are nourished by religion and spirituality and find solace

in spirituality, which is a transcendent experience, as they face their fundamental conflict, and meaning. It will be important to keep an eye on the meanings of religion and spirituality for the client applying for spiritually-oriented counseling.

### **Transparency and Self-Disclosure**

Throughout the therapeutic process, the therapist must be honest and open to the client about his or her life. In this way, a connection is established between life and the relationship between the therapist and the client. (Van Deurzen, 1997). What will enable the process to gain positive momentum is the presence of the therapist and the integration of the client's pieces like puzzle pieces (Corey, 2015). Although therapists have concerns about self-disclosure, Yalom (2002) has examined self-disclosure under three headings: (i) *The mechanism of therapy*: At this stage, real clarity is presented about the mechanism of therapy. Concepts such as privacy and here and now are clarified. In spiritually oriented counseling, on the other hand, it includes giving information about what a spiritually oriented counselor is and what it does not mean, its difference from other orientations, and what awaits the client in the process. (ii) *Emotions in the here and now*: It involves the therapist opening up about the feelings he or she feels towards the client at that moment. However, the main issue here is that this opening is in favor of the client and that it is transmitted in a healthy way. In spiritually-oriented psychological counseling, it can be carried out as the expression of spiritual feelings that occur in the environment in that room at that moment. (iii) *The therapist's own life*: Although the therapist's opening of his/her own life is generally viewed as hesitant, Yalom (2018) says that opening up his/her own life mostly has a positive effect on the process. Especially when the client asked questions about the therapist's life, the therapist did not see any harm in answering these questions sincerely and honestly. In the process of spiritually oriented-counseling, if the therapist has had an experience similar to the client's, he or she can share it with the client and even become a model for the client. Or it can make the client feel that he/she is not alone. In this way, the client can also be supported to open up.

### **Supporting**

Generally, clients remember the supportive words and reactions of their therapists about therapy years later (Yalom, 2011). For this reason, Yalom (2002) emphasizes that support is extremely important. It is always crucial, to be honest and open in supportive statements. For support, any behavior observed in the client's history or during the therapy process can be given as an example. In addition, the therapist can present positive feedback about the client as support (Yalom, 2003). There is no harm in giving objective praise, especially when the client takes responsibility and takes an important step or takes action. However, each therapist has a unique style, and the therapist's skill will be to express these supporting statements uniquely (Yalom, 2018).

Supporting clients who resort to the process in religious or spiritual matters; appears as an essential skill in subjects such as confronting death, questioning identity and meaning, starting or continuing worship, will, and choice. It is important to offer realistic support to the client here.

### **Empathy**

The concept of empathy and true empathy, which was discussed in detail by Rogers (1961), is also vital in existential therapy. According to existential psychotherapy, empathy is particularly concerned with the here and now (Yalom, 2011). It is very important to activate it at that moment. Therapy hours have a different meaning for clients than they do for therapists. Therefore, it is very valuable to deal with what the client feels in the session room (Yalom, 2002). Yalom (2002) divides empathy into two parts: (i) *Looking through the client's glasses*: Sometimes there are situations where the therapist pays a lot of attention but the client pays no attention, or vice versa. In such cases, it would be helpful to ask the client to evaluate previous sessions. (ii) *Teaching empathy to the client*: Allowing the client to understand the therapist's feelings also teaches empathy to the client. For example, when asked how others would feel in a particular situation, the therapist may include himself/herself in "others". Or, the therapist can clarify and shed light on the client's assumptions about the therapist.

### **Here and Now**

The here-and-now approach, which exists in many approaches, is also of particular importance for existential therapy and spiritually oriented-psychological counseling. According to the existential approach, there are two basic assumptions of the here and now (Yalom, 2002): (i) *Interpersonal relations*: Many clients who come to therapy experience problems in their interpersonal relationships, and these problems sometimes serve other problems they bring to therapy. (ii) *Microcosm*: The behavioral patterns that the clients develop depending on the problem in interpersonal relationships will very likely emerge in their relationship with the therapist.

In the light of these two assumptions and the information discussed in the relationship title above, the therapist notices the expressions that emerge in the relationship between the therapist and the client; if the therapist evaluates the axis of here and now, the therapist will support the client to take a step towards awareness. If the therapist is having a hard time bringing the client to the here and now, they can get support from their feelings. At this point, it would be useful for him to talk about how he feels about the relationship at that moment (Yalom, 2002). In the context of spiritually-oriented psychological counseling, the relationship that the client establishes with the therapist may be similar to the relationship he or she establishes

with spiritual and religious elements. For example, a therapist who has noticed that the client sees the therapist as an authority talks about the anger that is present at the moment when the client is angry. While the anger is examined in detail, the anger of the client towards religious authorities may emerge.

### Talking About Death

Humans have been facing death since the first day they came to life and have to live with this truth throughout their life. This obligation can lead the individual to psychopathology, and it can also be one of the methods of coping with problems. Heidegger says that being aware of death liberates people (Young, 2000). In addition to this, May (2017) states that death is an uncontrollable situation, and the way we face death interferes with our freedom. In this parallel, Yalom (2018) mentions 4 propositions about death. These are: (i) *Death occupies an important place in our spiritual life*. It annoys us by constantly grumbling in the background. (ii) *Children are very interested in death*. One of the first developmental stages is coping with the fear of death. (iii) *We use various methods to deal with fears and these deep-seated fears*. If these defenses are not developed healthily, they can lead to clinical situations. In other words, psychopathology is a result of not being able to handle death. (iv) *Therefore, an effective therapy process is possible with awareness of death*.

Yalom (2018) rejects the idea that “when there is death we do not exist when we exist there is no death” while describing the connection between death and life. On the contrary, life and death are intertwined, when death comes to mind while life continues; he thinks that this leads to authentic existence. Because when we come to life, we bring death with us. Even though we try to ignore it, even this effort to ignore it proves the difficulty of its existence (Verneaux, 1994). The important thing is to deal with it. He even observed that facing death in cancer patients he worked with caused effective changes in their lives (Yalom, 2018). The reasons for this can be summarized as follows. Death, by making someone to look at something’s becoming rather than the way it happened; raises the person above the current state of existence (Yalom, 2018). When the fear of death is present, all other fears lose their meaning. In this case, if the person can cope with the fear of death healthily, he/she can feel a strong dominance. When it comes to death, delays disappear. That is, “Existence cannot be postponed.” (Yalom, 2018).

In particular, the grieving process is a process in which death awareness is studied. A bereaved often begins to ask fundamental existential questions such as, “Who am I working for?” and “What am I doing for?”. In a therapy process, these questions are important in terms of revealing one’s meaning (Yalom, 2018).

Of course, it is necessary to work on death anxiety in the therapy process. The important point is that the therapist does not have to give the client this experience.

Instead, he should follow the clues and trace the client's denial and acceptance processes. The subject of death, which is at the center of existence, somehow exists in the therapy process. Although many therapists avoid talking about death, the reasons for talking about death are as follows: Therapy is real life and there is no life without death. It has been observed that clients who face death show a positive development and it is beneficial in this respect. In studies conducted with those who are grieving the death of another, it has been observed that talking about death has a more practical effect on development than before mourning (Yalom, 2002). Parallel to the spiritually-oriented counseling processes, it is almost impossible to escape death. For this reason, the therapist should be brave in this regard and encourage the client. In the therapy, which progresses as a process in which what death means for the client, the concerns about death are investigated, the fear of death is discussed in parts, religious beliefs about death are discussed, and dreams about death are mentioned, the client will also encounter death in a safe environment (Yalom, 2002). In this way, the client who encounters a reality such as death will also face the steps one will take and the responsibilities he will take about what he can do.

### **Supporting the Client to Take Responsibility**

People become free with the choices they make while constructing their existence in the world and the responsibilities they will take as a result of these choices (Çelik, 2017). Choices and the freedom that comes, as a result, impose a responsibility on people. In this way, the link between freedom, choice, and responsibility is established. Although the concept of responsibility does not seem to be related to existence at first, when a person creates his existence, one creates the meaning of the world one fills. For this reason, it is the individual's responsibility to create meaning and create one's existence. So it is truly related. Regarding this, Sartre says, "Humans are also fully responsible for their own life; they are responsible not only for their actions but also for the situations in which they cannot act", emphasizing that he is responsible for every moment. However, he adds that humans cannot be responsible unless they're completely free (Sartre, 2019). Yalom (2018) does not completely agree with Sartre's view. He worries that this will lead to landlessness, as it will be ignoring the meanings outside of one's own. However, of course, he often includes the concept of responsibility in his works and especially mentions how responsible therapists will work with their clients. Because he says that no therapist can complete a day without experiencing the experience of avoiding responsibility.

One of the things clients do to avoid responsibility is a compulsion. In other words, they do not want to accept that they chose the life they are complaining about willingly. Because if they accept the choice, it is necessary to take responsibility, which is not easy for everyone. The second is the displacement of responsibility. In this case,

clients attribute the responsibility for the process to the therapist, the problem, the causes, or someone else. Because realizing that they have the responsibility can cause a sudden confrontation with freedom. This can also create anxiety. Here it will be necessary to help the client accept that their feelings are their own. The last is the denial of responsibility. In other words, it is “losing mind” (Yalom, 2011). Clients refuse responsibilities for a period when they are not even responsible for their behavior. That is, they avoid autonomous behavior. Clients who do this are usually those who are aware of what they need to do but do not take steps. They are likely to be attached to the therapist (Yalom, 2018).

Clients will experience taking responsibility in the process, and sometimes, of course, they will have difficulties. However, the thing that the therapist should pay attention to is not taking responsibility for the client. Yalom (2013) says this: “Do not usurp the personal responsibilities of others. Do not aspire to be a breast that suckles the whole universe. If you want people to grow up, help them learn to be their own parents.”

Responsibility, which is one of the most tough stages of the therapy process, is a hard experience for most clients and therapists. Clients want to blame someone or something else for the events that happen to them or what they experience, and they want to throw the responsibility at someone else. In this sense, the therapist trying to understand the client should give the client responsibility after a certain point (Yalom, 2002). It is also frequently encountered in spiritually oriented counseling processes that responsibility is given to fate, death, God, religious authorities, religious rules, habits, or someone else. At the stage of reassigning the responsibility to the client, the arrangements made within the sessions will help to develop a sense of responsibility. Therapists can give the responsibility to clients with some behaviors such as not being reminded of the session day and time, waiting for the client to break the silence being a sanction in case of being late or canceling late, and asking the client for summaries to be made during the session. However, for the client to realize the responsibilities related to one’s life, “*Even if 99% of these events are the fault of others, what can belong to you in the remaining 1%?*” (Yalom, 2002), “*Where are you in this situation/what are you doing?*”, “*I could not hear your voice in the story you told*” can be emphasized to the client. It should not be forgotten that these sentences should be renewed according to the relationship between the therapist and the client. Using it, in the same way, may not be in favor of the client. In addition, it should not be forgotten that decisions should never be made on behalf of the client in cases where the client is in a dilemma or wants to take action. The fact that the client is at the decision stage also means that she/he is facing freedom (Yalom, 2002).

## **Dream**

The main purpose of the dream study of the existential approach is to reveal the meanings that the client attributes to the symbols (May & Yalom, 1989). Therefore, every detail in the dream is mentioned and its meanings are questioned.

The client is requested to describe his/her dream repeatedly, that affects the client, or that the client wants to tell. While the client describes the dream in detail, the therapist/psychological counselor takes notes so as not to forget every detail. Yalom (2002) says “pillage and plunder the dream” for this. What is meant here is to scrutinize the dream and discuss every detail with the client comprehensively. Data that will affect the therapy process will be reached.

Then, the noted symbols are examined thoroughly with the client. What these symbols mean for the client is questioned (Yüksel Şahin, 2018). In the use of existential dream work in spiritual psychological counseling, it is important to go into the details of the client’s spiritual dreams and question their meanings.

## **Case Example**

### **Anamnesis**

The client is a 35-year-old single woman working in the private sector. She applied to the therapy process regarding the recent loss of her father, the mourning process, spiritual depression, and the search for meaning. The client lives with her older sister and mother. The client received an intense religious education from her family and shaped her life according to religious rules for a certain period of time. After she started to work abroad later her university graduation, she started not to prefer her religious life over time, she left the hijab abroad, which she preferred at a young age of her own accord. After the death of her father, she returned to Turkey for sure and started new questions in her life with the mourning process, she started to question the meaning of life. For this reason, she applied to the existentialist spiritually oriented counseling process. The purpose of the client, in her own words, is to find reasons to live, to alleviate her father’s grief, and to get rid of revolving thoughts about the past.

### **Formulation**

The case formulation was prepared considering the beginning, developing, learning, and responsibility stages of existential psychotherapy. According to this:

*Beginning:* In the therapy process, first of all, the reasons for the client’s application were emphasized and a detailed analysis was made. These were determined as the mourning process, confrontation with death, search for meaning, religious/spiritual search, and inability to decide with one’s life. Afterward, research on the

meanings attributed to these subjects by the client continued. It has been noticed that the counselee has not evaluated spirituality, which she considers the meaning of life, in the last five years, emphasizing the feeling of emptiness created by this situation. It has been observed that these void forces the client to evaluate death and make decisions for the future of her life. The client states that she has lost all the reasons she knows to hold on to life, and this aimlessness drags her to a dark place. At the beginning stage, when the meanings of the material brought by the client were questioned, the meanings of meaning, reason for living, “losing” the reasons for living, death, darkness, and clinging were discussed with the client one by one. When talking about the meanings that the counselee attributed to spirituality before and after, it was determined that she evaluated spirituality only within the scope of the religious education she received from her family and did not create another option.

*Developing:* After the discovery of meanings, how and when these meanings are formed is emphasized. If the client discovers that the freedom and meaning she encounters are not her meaning, the client is supported. This stage is usually the longest and can sometimes be intertwined with the learning and responsibility stage. In addition, the client is often brought to the “here and now” to work on relationship building and loneliness anxiety. Here, the client is supported in terms of getting rid of this meaning-making process shaped by the pressure of society and family and creating her own meaning. It has been seen that avoiding confronting death, which is one of the important points, is also dependent on this. In the sessions about death, attention was drawn to the “here and now” in the life that continues with the client, who stated that death was not as scary as it was seen from afar. Sessions were seen as an opportunity for the client to experience the “here and now” and were practiced here. Practicing the “here and now” is also necessary for repetitive reflections on the past. In these sessions, which were spoken with the client, the client experienced awareness at the point of creating her own spiritual meaning and getting rid of the spiritual meaning from the family. However, at this stage of the process, themes of dreams such as murdering the father, being caught red-handed, not being able to get out of a narrow room, etc. drew attention. In the sessions in which dreams were scrutinized, she realized that she felt guilty about her family to the point of creating her own spiritual meaning.

In addition, it has been observed that the client sometimes came to the next session without thinking about the issues that she should think about, and in these cases, the client’s embarrassment was emphasized by drawing attention to the relationship between the client and the therapist. Later, the microcosm of this feeling was mentioned, and it was realized that she had difficulty fulfilling her responsibilities in her life and that she experienced this embarrassment every time she did not. The state of not taking responsibility despite embarrassment projects the theme of not

living just because there is death. Within the framework of freedom and barriers to taking responsibility, this embarrassment was discussed, and steps were taken toward awareness.

*Learning and Responsibility:* As a result of the awareness reached, the stage of learning and responsibility has been started. Here, the client is expected to take action by making inferences from their awareness. For this, the appropriate environment for the client is provided by the therapist. The therapist may first practice the take-to-action phase in the session room.

The mourning process of the client, who stated that what she did to her father felt like disloyalty at the point of finding her own meaning, also doubled this stage. Here, the issues of guilt and separation have been studied based on the importance of the client taking a step towards liberation by taking responsibility. The meanings she attributed to the mourning and the way of life of mourning and the loneliness she felt continued to be discussed in parallel. In the grieving process, the client asks the therapist, “Did you lose someone?” In response to her question, she opened herself up and supported the client. After the sessions, in which various exercises were made to take responsibility for her own meaning and life, and where emotions and empathy were dominant, the client took steps to create her own meaning after a painful process and began to question the reality and accuracy of the religious education she received from her family. She entered a new learning process by doing research on the question marks in her mind. In this process, she started to determine her mistakes and truths. The client is supported to take action in line with what they have learned, and the client is encouraged to experience freedom in decision-making situations without taking responsibility. The steps taken by the client were praised from the objective window.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has been shaped mainly within the framework of the views of Yalom and later May, who have had a great impact on the existence of Existential Psychotherapy. Considering the views of Yalom and May, it can be said that confronting death and freedom is one of the basic concerns of human beings, and the basic formula of the theory is to take responsibility and take action and live existential freedom in a balanced way in order to cope with these anxieties. The formula in question was shaped by the fact that Yalom and May examined and influenced the views of existential thinkers such as Sartre, Camus, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer and brought existence to therapy rooms. Not all comments were taken as is filtered and evaluated.

Within the framework of this formula, it is seen that the main purpose of the therapist is to support the client at the point of creating one’s own existence and using the relevant techniques. Although existential psychotherapy already contains spiritual

elements and even emphasizes cultural sensitivity, it is not possible to develop a formula suitable for every culture and religion. For this reason, Yalom mentions that each therapist will create their own approach. In this direction, in this study, a culturally sensitive study was carried out by considering the concept, technique, and structure of the existential approach. In addition, since an existentialist perspective on spiritually oriented counseling is not presented in the literature, this paper is thought to contribute to the literature.

In addition, the option to go beyond talking about the spiritual issues that existential psychotherapy has already done in the session, to identify the spiritual resources of the client and to use these resources if the client's readiness is appropriate, is also mentioned in this study. In addition, a guide is presented to therapists or psychological counselors who want to work within the framework of the existential approach in the face of the client's request for a spiritually oriented process.

The existential approach, unlike other approaches before it, opened an important period by not ignoring spiritual and religious issues in the session room and shedding light on those who came after it. In this respect, it is considered quite suitable for spiritually oriented-psychological counseling processes. In addition to these, it may be risky for the client to view religion, God, and spiritual elements as just an object. For this reason, the therapist should be careful. In addition to all these, a professional who wants to do psychological counseling with an existential spiritual orientation should not be limited to Yalom and May; surely it also feeds on Frankl's views; it is also important to understand logotherapy. It is recommended to look at Frankl's concept of meaning, especially in the sessions where meaning will be studied.

In future studies, existential spiritually oriented counseling adaptations can be made to group processes, Islamic culture, and adolescents; models can be developed.

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