

Existential Approaches in Humanistic Counseling to Overcome Unfinished Business and Sense of Loneliness or Replace Loneliness: Triggers for Narcotics Use

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Abstract

Psychological problems such as loneliness and unresolved emotional conflicts (unfinished business) are increasingly recognized as important issues in modern counseling studies because they are often associated with various maladaptive behaviors, including substance abuse. This study aims to explore how an existential approach within humanistic counseling can help individuals address loneliness and unresolved emotional issues that may contribute to the risk of substance use. This research employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the counseling process and the client's psychological experiences during existential-humanistic counseling sessions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of counseling sessions, and reflective documentation. The findings indicate that existential-humanistic counseling helps clients develop greater self-awareness, reinterpret past emotional experiences, and discover meaning in their life struggles. Through authentic therapeutic relationships and phenomenological exploration, clients were able to confront feelings of isolation and gradually resolve unresolved emotional conflicts. The counseling process also encouraged clients to take personal responsibility and develop healthier coping mechanisms when facing emotional distress. These findings suggest that existential-humanistic counseling provides a meaningful framework for helping individuals transform loneliness and unresolved emotional issues into opportunities for personal growth and psychological well-being.

Keywords: existential counseling, humanistic approach, unfinished business, loneliness

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological problems such as loneliness and unresolved emotional conflicts, often referred to as unfinished business, have become important issues in modern counseling studies because both are frequently associated with various maladaptive behaviors, including substance abuse. Unfinished business refers to unresolved emotional experiences from the past that continue to influence an individual's present psychological condition. These unresolved conflicts can generate prolonged psychological distress and disrupt an individual's mental well-being. From an existential counseling perspective, such experiences are often related to a crisis of meaning in life and an individual's difficulty in understanding and accepting life experiences as a whole (Schneider, 2019).

Loneliness is another psychological condition that frequently co-occurs with unresolved emotional conflicts. Loneliness is not merely associated with a lack of social interaction but also with an existential experience in which individuals feel alienated from themselves and others. Previous research suggests that existential struggles such as boredom, meaninglessness, and loneliness can contribute to addictive behaviors as individuals attempt to escape emotional pain. As noted in the literature, "loneliness and existential struggles such as boredom and meaninglessness are often linked to addiction" (Thompson, 2016). This condition indicates that prolonged loneliness may encourage individuals to seek ways to reduce emotional pressure, including through risky behaviors such as substance abuse.

In this context, existential-humanistic counseling becomes a relevant approach to understanding the psychological dynamics of individuals experiencing loneliness and unfinished business. This approach emphasizes self-awareness, the search for meaning, and personal responsibility in responding to life experiences. Through phenomenological exploration, clients are encouraged to explore their subjective experiences more deeply and authentically. As explained by Cooper (2007), phenomenological exploration allows clients to explore their thoughts and emotions in a non-judgmental and meaningful manner, enabling individuals to gain deeper insight into their psychological experiences.

The therapeutic relationship within existential-humanistic counseling also plays a crucial role in the process of psychological healing. This approach emphasizes the development of authentic relationships between counselor and client, often described as the I-Thou relationship. In such relationships, counselors and clients interact with empathy, openness, and authenticity, creating a safe environment for clients to explore their life experiences. Authentic therapeutic relationships enable individuals to confront feelings of loneliness and unresolved emotional conflicts in a supportive context (Georganda, 2021).

Existential philosophy further enriches the understanding of emotional distress by reframing it as a natural human experience rather than merely a pathological condition. Emotional distress often arises when individuals encounter fundamental existential concerns such as freedom, uncertainty, loss, and isolation. Instead of viewing distress as something that must simply be eliminated, existential counseling views it as an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. Understanding distress within existential contexts allows counselors to help clients explore deeper questions related to identity, purpose, and life meaning (Wharne, 2021; Schnipke & Mackay, 2023).

Another key contribution of existential counseling lies in its emphasis on meaning-making in the face of suffering and emotional distress. Research on meaning-



centered psychotherapy shows that helping individuals reconstruct meaning in their lives can significantly reduce existential distress and enhance psychological well-being. By encouraging individuals to reflect on their experiences and life narratives, existential counseling helps transform psychological suffering into opportunities for growth, resilience, and renewed purpose in life (Breitbart et al., 2018; Vibrans, Lehmann-Laue, & Mehnert-Theuerkauf, 2023).

Although various studies have addressed the relationship between loneliness, emotional conflict, and substance abuse, studies that specifically integrate an existential-humanistic approach in the context of counseling to address unfinished business and loneliness are still relatively limited. Some studies focus more on medical approaches or cognitive-behavioral therapy in the treatment of addiction. In fact, the existential-humanistic approach has great potential because it emphasizes exploring subjective experiences and searching for the meaning of life as part of the recovery process. Therefore, this research offers novelty in the form of the application of an existential approach in the framework of humanistic counseling to understand more deeply the relationship between unfinished business, loneliness, and the risk of narcotics abuse.

This study aims to explore how an existential approach in humanistic counseling can help individuals overcome unfinished business and feelings of loneliness that have the potential to trigger narcotics use. This research also aims to understand the counseling process that helps individuals find meaning in life, increase self-awareness, and develop healthier coping mechanisms in the face of emotional stress. Thus, the results of this study are expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of a more comprehensive counseling approach in the prevention of narcotics abuse.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals who experience unfinished business and loneliness as potential triggers for narcotics use. The qualitative approach was chosen because it can explore the meaning of complex psychological experiences and understand individuals' emotional dynamics more comprehensively. Case studies are used to explore psychological phenomena in real-life contexts in depth, enabling researchers to understand the processes of change that occur during counseling interventions (Yin, 2018).

The research subject in this study is a female student aged 19–20 years who is studying in the third semester of college. The selection of subjects was carried out by purposive sampling by considering the suitability of individual characteristics with the focus of the research, namely the existence of unfinished business experiences, feelings of loneliness, and emotional pressure related to past life experiences. The study subjects also showed decreased motivation for life and difficulty adjusting to the social environment, so these conditions are considered relevant to study in the context of existential counseling.

Data collection in this study was conducted using several techniques, namely observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to understand the subjects' emotional states and behavior during the counseling process. In-depth interviews are used to explore the research subject's subjective experiences, feelings, and sense of meaning in life. Meanwhile, documentation is used to compile



research data, including records of the counseling process, client reflections, and other supporting information related to the research process.

The intervention in this study uses a humanistic counseling approach with an existential perspective that emphasizes developing self-awareness, searching for the meaning of life, and personal responsibility for one's life. The counseling process is carried out through several stages, namely case identification, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, and evaluation. In the treatment stage, the counselor facilitates the client's exploration of unresolved life experiences, understanding of the sources of loneliness, and development of a new, more constructive perspective on life.

The data analysis in this study uses an interactive analysis model proposed by Miles et al (2014) which consists of three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. At the data reduction stage, the researcher carried out a selection and simplification process of data obtained from observation and interview results. Furthermore, the data is presented as a systematic narrative description to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon under study. The last stage is the drawing of conclusions and verification, which is carried out continuously during the research process (Miles et al, 2014).

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employs source and method triangulation. Triangulation is carried out by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure the consistency of the information. In addition, the researcher conducts member checking with the research subjects to ensure that the interpretation of the data is consistent with the subjects' experiences. Through this process, it is hoped that the results of the research will have a high level of validity and credibility so that it can provide an accurate picture of the effectiveness of the existential approach in humanistic counseling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study reveal that implementing an existential approach within humanistic counseling contributed to significant psychological changes in the client, who experienced unfinished business and feelings of loneliness. The counseling process was conducted in several stages: case identification, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, and evaluation. During the counseling sessions, the client gradually became more open in expressing personal experiences and emotional struggles that had previously been difficult to communicate, particularly those related to family pressure, interpersonal conflicts, and a sense of loss of meaning in life.

At the case identification stage, it was found that the client experienced considerable emotional pressure due to a mismatch between her personal interests and the academic major she had chosen under family influence. This situation created internal conflict and reduced motivation in life. Furthermore, the client had difficulty adapting to a new social environment and felt emotionally disconnected from those around her. The absence of a trusted emotional support figure further intensified the feelings of loneliness experienced by the client.

The diagnosis stage revealed that the client's difficulties were not limited to adjustment problems but were closely related to an existential crisis. The client perceived that she had lost autonomy over her life path and felt trapped in circumstances that did



not align with her personal aspirations. Such experiences created feelings of emptiness, confusion, and emotional isolation. These findings confirm that unresolved emotional experiences (unfinished business) can significantly influence an individual's perception of life meaning and psychological well-being.

Following the counseling intervention using the existential-humanistic approach, notable improvements were observed in three main aspects: understanding, comfort, and action. These aspects represent cognitive awareness, emotional stability, and behavioral responses toward personal difficulties. The client began to demonstrate a new perspective on life experiences and developed a more adaptive way of managing emotional distress.

Table 1.

Client's Psychological Condition Before and After Counseling

Aspect	Before Counseling	After Counseling
Understanding	The client believed life was meaningless if it did not follow personal desires	The client realized that life continues despite difficulties and challenges
Comfort	The client felt that sadness and emotional pain would never end	The client understood that sadness is temporary and part of life experiences
Action	The client was unable to control emotional reactions and often cried when recalling past events	The client was able to regulate breathing, manage emotions, and respond more calmly

The changes that occurred in the client were also reflected in the transformation of cognitive perception regarding life experiences. Before the counseling process, the client viewed problems as obstacles that prevented happiness. However, after the intervention, the client began to understand that both positive and negative experiences are natural components of life. This shift in perspective represents a significant cognitive transformation in the client's understanding of life's meaning.

Table 2.

Transformation in the Client's Understanding of Life Meaning

Indicator	Before Counseling	After Counseling
View of Life	Life is meaningless if not lived according to personal wishes	Life continues and problems are part of the human experience
Interpretation of Problems	Problems are barriers to happiness	Problems are opportunities for personal growth
Meaning of Life	Happiness is only obtained when personal desires are fulfilled	Meaning can be found even in difficult experiences

In addition to cognitive changes, emotional improvements were also observed during the counseling process. The client gradually experienced a greater sense of psychological comfort and emotional stability. Initially, the client perceived sadness as a permanent emotional state caused by past traumatic experiences. However, through existential exploration during counseling sessions, the client became aware that emotions are dynamic and that personal acceptance can contribute to emotional healing.



Table 3.
 Behavioral Changes in Emotional Response

Behavioral Indicator	Before Counseling	After Counseling
Emotional Control	Easily overwhelmed by sadness	Able to regulate emotional responses
Physical Response	Trembling and unstable breathing when recalling past experiences	Able to control breathing and maintain composure
Coping Strategy	Avoidance and emotional withdrawal	Reflective thinking and constructive coping

Overall, the results indicate that existential-humanistic counseling effectively facilitated the client's psychological transformation. Through meaning exploration, self-awareness, and personal responsibility, the client was able to reinterpret past experiences and develop healthier coping mechanisms. These findings suggest that the existential approach can play an important role in addressing loneliness and unresolved emotional conflicts that may potentially lead to maladaptive coping behaviors, including the risk of narcotics use.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that feelings of isolation experienced by the client can be understood through the existential perspective in humanistic counseling. Existential theory explains that isolation is an inherent aspect of human existence that can influence psychological well-being. Existential counseling identifies three main forms of isolation: interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation, and existential isolation. Among these forms, existential isolation refers to the awareness that individuals are ultimately separate from others and must face life's experiences independently. This realization can generate psychological distress but may also serve as a catalyst for personal growth when explored in counseling (Helm, Chau, & Greenberg, 2022; Sease, Cox, & Knight, 2022).

In the counseling process, addressing existential isolation requires therapeutic strategies that emphasize empathy, authenticity, and meaningful interpersonal connection. Humanistic counseling places strong importance on the therapeutic relationship as a medium for reducing the client's sense of disconnection. Through empathetic listening and authentic interaction, counselors create a supportive environment in which clients feel understood and validated. This relational process can help reduce feelings of isolation and encourage clients to explore their experiences more openly (Guindon, 2019; Sease et al., 2022).

Another important existential theme emerging from this study is the role of existential anxiety and guilt in shaping emotional experiences. Within existential psychology, anxiety and guilt are not necessarily viewed as pathological conditions but rather as natural aspects of human existence. These emotions often arise when individuals confront questions about meaning, responsibility, and life choices. When explored constructively in counseling, existential anxiety can motivate individuals to reflect on their values and redefine their life direction (Länge, 2015; Peter, 2024).

The counseling process also emphasizes the importance of meaning-making as a central component of psychological healing. Existential-humanistic therapy encourages



individuals to interpret life experiences, including suffering and emotional pain, in ways that contribute to personal meaning and growth. Through reflective dialogue, clients can transform painful experiences into opportunities for deeper self-understanding and resilience. This meaning-centered approach has been shown to strengthen emotional well-being and promote psychological transformation (Gordon et al., 2021; Lu, 2022).

Another significant aspect in addressing unresolved emotional issues is the integration of experiences across time. Existential counseling helps clients connect past experiences, present struggles, and future aspirations within a coherent life narrative. By reflecting on unresolved emotional events from the past, individuals can gradually reinterpret these experiences and integrate them into a more meaningful understanding of their lives. This process supports emotional healing and fosters a sense of continuity in personal identity (Lu, 2022; Gordon et al., 2021).

Furthermore, existential counseling emphasizes empowerment and personal responsibility in the process of psychological change. Individuals are encouraged to recognize their freedom to make choices and their responsibility in shaping their lives. This perspective empowers clients to take ownership of their decisions and emotional responses rather than perceiving themselves as passive victims of circumstances. As a result, clients can develop stronger psychological resilience and a greater sense of personal agency (Pashak et al., 2023; Längle, 2015).

Finally, existential-humanistic counseling also highlights the importance of authenticity and connection with others. Authentic living involves aligning one's actions with personal values and embracing the uniqueness of one's experiences. At the same time, existential approaches emphasize the importance of community and relational solidarity in addressing feelings of isolation, particularly in contemporary social contexts characterized by uncertainty and psychological stress. By fostering authenticity and meaningful connections, existential counseling can help individuals transform feelings of isolation and unresolved emotional struggles into opportunities for personal growth and deeper human connection (Ratner, 2019; Field & Ghoston, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of addressing loneliness and unresolved emotional conflicts (unfinished business) within the framework of existential-humanistic counseling. The findings suggest that emotional distress experienced by individuals is often closely related to existential struggles such as the search for meaning, feelings of isolation, and unresolved past experiences. Existential-humanistic counseling offers a meaningful approach by encouraging self-awareness, personal responsibility, and exploration of subjective experiences within a supportive therapeutic relationship. Through authentic dialogue and phenomenological exploration, individuals can reinterpret emotional suffering and develop healthier coping mechanisms. The counseling process also supports individuals in integrating past experiences with present understanding and future aspirations, enabling emotional healing and personal growth. Therefore, existential-humanistic counseling can serve as a valuable framework for helping individuals transform loneliness and unresolved emotional issues into opportunities for deeper self-understanding and meaningful life development.



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