

Existential Therapy – 100 Key Points & Techniques

Susan Iacovou & Karen Weixel-Dixon (2015). London: Routledge.

Having started on the ADEP at Regent's University this year, *Existential Therapy – 100 Key Points & Techniques* seemed a rather apt title to review, although potentially a year too late given that I had already signed on the dotted line for two years, and arguably longer. This installment is part of Windy Dryden's Series of books examining 100 key points and techniques of different schools of psychotherapy. It is a welcome addition which tries, and succeeds, in highlighting existential therapy as a separate but important theoretical position within psychotherapy more generally.

Susan Iacovou and Karen Weixel-Dixon provide a comprehensive and accessible guide to a body of knowledge as well as the wider psychotherapeutic approach informed by existentialism. The authors divide their book into five sections: existentialism, theoretical assumptions, existential phenomenological therapy in practice, ethics and a last part where they bring it all together. The majority of the key points reside in the theoretical assumptions and practice sections, useful for the trainee as it picks up concepts brought to therapy and addresses the potential of working, not just with the existential givens, but also with practical issues such as addiction, trauma, self-harm and suicide. There is a balance between giving short introductions to key existential concepts such as being-in-the-world, intentionality and inter-subjectivity and the practical way of being with a client.

Probably the most useful subsection to me was key competencies of the existential therapist. There was the potential of coming out in favour of a specific approach favoured by the individual, but I imagine having two authors helped in this regard and ensured the balance that is apparent throughout the book. A good example of this is their 70th point 'developing a personal existential therapy', which addresses therapist disclosure and exposure, and the potential for an existential therapist to sit at either end of the spectrum. I often find myself looking for answers as a practitioner, but this, and the adjoining chapters, reinforces the idea that there are no rights or wrongs and it is the attitude that pervades the encounter more than a set of rules.

I had been sceptical that existential therapy could be distilled into 100 points, because I had thought that the discourse did not lend itself to such a segmentation as perhaps other therapies might. I was concerned that a prescriptive view would be adopted. I need not have worried. The separation and categorisation of the work helps to break down into readily available sections a theoretical foundation that is inherently complex and ambiguous.

The book feels well written and accessible. Its format of short, punchy chapters (no longer than three pages) gives it a concise and clear style,

irrespective of whether the reader is dipping in and out, or reading from start to finish. There are certain phrases that feel ambitious and grounding in equal measure, as well as being potentially welcoming and encouraging potential clients towards existentialism. An example is as '*every existential practitioner... must meet every client, indeed every person, with an attitude of naivete and generous curiosity*' (p 176), which strikes me as being an alluring goal for us all.

This perspective is reinforced by the final chapter of the book, 'The case for existentialism as an over-arching framework' where the authors contrast the plethora of alternative therapies with the completeness of existential thought. This feels like a nice, rounded conclusion that is not a conclusion (after all, how could a conclusion be fully reached given the material), but that brings together everything previously mentioned, in that existential psychotherapy can '*effect a profound appreciation of our situation in the world, and how we exist in it*' (p 242). As a one liner, that has the potential to really move people, whether prospective clients or practitioners from other fields, as well as reinforce a solidity that existential therapy offers something special in the inter-subjective relationship when compared to other therapies where the therapist is bound, at least in part, from prescribed modes of being.

I've been asked to try and describe some things I don't like about the book, which I've struggled with. I'd have liked an extra page for some of the key points, to allow a little more depth in a large proportion. Standing within the overarching series of books is a limitation, and there is a huge scope for enhancing the work. One example would have been to develop the ideas around personal integrations and potentially include a couple of pages on individual approaches to give depth to the idea that existential foundations take many forms.

As a whole the book is useful. For trainees, I find it provides a concise snippet from which a deeper understanding can be gained by reading the primary sources. I wonder about the value to the experienced practitioner, but bow to some of the testimonials from far more experienced professionals such as Betty Cannon and Mick Cooper than me, that it provides inherent value to the accredited practitioner. Certainly as a quick and accessible reference book, I have yet to come across anything that remotely gives this level of overview in relatively plain english. Finally, I think the biggest audience is potential clients and a general audience as an exceptionally accessible way into the field and the concepts more generally. It will remain part of my library going forward, and the relationship with it will alter, and that feels like part of the output.

Ben Scanlon