

EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS AND THEIR MORAL IMPLICATIONS

A Statement from the Work Group on Existential Questions and Their Moral Implications of the International Work Group on Dying, Death and Bereavement

THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES IN HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION

Human beings have the capacity to ask existential questions. These questions are concerned with the nature of authenticity and the responsibility of choice. Existential questions are those that are discovered via a person's contemplation of reality and meaning. When these questions are asked, a person's perception of reality and meaning may be transformed.

The existential relates to both questions of existence and to the role of the individual in determining his or her own choices through acts of will. Authenticity is concerned with pursuing genuine and responsible choices.

Human beings are persons with the potential for an authentic existence; capable of interpersonal relationships; and a consciousness of past, present, and future. Human beings' experience can include loss and suffering, love, hope, and joy.

Many existential questions arise around "the meaning of life" in the context of an inevitable death. The pursuit of answers to these questions may influence our relationships with others, our environment, and our ultimate perception of reality.

Questions commonly asked include:

- Who am I?
- Why do I have to die now?
- What am I doing here?

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- What is the meaning of life?
- Why is life so unfair?
- Why do I have to go on living?
- Where do I fit in the world?
- Why does God allow this?
- Is there a meaning in suffering?
- Why do I have to suffer?
- What is the meaning of my life now?
- What has been important to me in my life?
- Is there life after death?
- Will I see my loved ones again?
- Have I made a difference?

Most individuals have their own perceptions of what are existential questions, although they may not clearly formulate these questions as existential ones. The perceptions and the questions are infinitely varied, have no boundaries, and are influenced by cultural factors. There are no universal answers. Cultures can be categorized on a continuum from individualist to collectivist, depending on the values they espouse. They also have different traditions to prepare people for death and rituals that frame behavior and give meaning to what is happening. Where a person lives will shape the answers he or she gives to existential questions. For many people, these existential questions are asked in straightforward terms and arise out of their life experience. Often both questions and answers are communicated via the use of a range of metaphors.

This document is focussed on the existential questions of the dying person and his or her care givers. We recognize however that questions will emerge at other moments in life. People who experience transformative events may ask existential questions. The asking of these existential questions may lead people to revise their own worldview, which in itself may be a painful or even traumatic process.

While existential questions may arise at any time, we often learn more in times of darkness than in light. The journey towards death and bereavement acts as a catalyst to the emergence of existential questions, both for the dying person and for their care givers. It may be that it is the pain, the tensions, and the conflicts that can be experienced as the end of life approaches that shapes the questions that arise. But the questions may also reflect the living and being that is present at this time in people's lives.

There is no one way to address existential questions, but a setting may be created in which the patient or family member can tell his/her story. Opportunities may then be provided to reflect upon this story and become aware of existential issues. Sharing one's own existential concerns within a safe environment may facilitate others to explore their personal questions. This opening up to other people's stories may become the basis for mutual empathy.

All existential questions have moral implications. An openness to one's own existential questions as they arise facilitates the mutual response which is the root of authentic ethical decision making.

It is thus appropriate for the International Work Group in Death, Dying and Bereavement to address existential questions and their moral implications.

ASSUMPTIONS & PRINCIPLES

Assumption: A statement accepted as fact on the basis of commonly observed experience.

Principle: A collective judgement as to the desirable response to the assumption.
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Assumption: Human beings are confronted with personal, social, cultural, and environmental changes.

Principle: a) Individuals need appropriate support to adapt to the complexities of social, cultural, and environmental changes. These changes may prompt, in a reflective way, reflections by the individual upon existential issues that are important to them. Such a process can occur at any time throughout the life span.

Assumption: Humans are social and spiritual beings who live in different societies with diverse sets of moral codes, values, and beliefs both within and between societies.

Principle: a) Recognizing the complexity and diversity of the multicultural nature of society, people should acknowledge as far as possible the values and beliefs of others.

Principle: b) Respect for individual differences requires that people acknowledge the varied ways in which others can communicate their existential concerns.

Assumption: Humans are rational and emotional beings with the potential of reflecting on and questioning the meaning of their own existence.

Principle: a) Questions about the meaning of existence may vary in nature and may occur at different times throughout a lifetime. But they are likely to embrace similar, common concerns. Many different answers will result.

Principle: b) Important questions which challenge our existence as human beings are likely to address the importance of intimacy, altruism, and the individual responsibility of moral choice.

Assumption: Every human being is an individual who in some way explores and expresses his or her existential questions.

Principle: a) People have the right to have their values transgressed by others when their respective answers to existential questions are in conflict.

Assumption: All existential questions have moral implications. Few choices are unambiguously good and the moral self feels and acts in the context of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Principle: a) People can be helped to take and relinquish responsibilities.

Principle: b) People can be helped to take responsibility in different ways at different stages of the life cycle in a socially and culturally acceptable manner. The relationship between morality and responsibility may vary in different cultures.

Assumption: Human beings experience loss, suffering, and feelings of hopelessness.

Principle: a) People who are confronted with loss, suffering, and feelings of hopelessness should be supported in their attempts to explore existential questions and to seek their own answers.

Principle: b) People experiencing loss, suffering, and feelings of hopelessness can be supported by practical means and by an empathic caring presence which can help give a sense of personal worth. They may also need to have time alone, reflection is a very individual matter.

Assumption: Human beings have the right to experience love, hope, and joy.

Principle: a) People should have the freedom to express love, hope, and joy in a personally authentic way insofar as it does not impinge on the authenticity of others.

Assumption: Human beings encounter death as part of the life cycle.

Principle: a) People at all stages of the life cycle should be helped as they face the inevitability of their own death and that of others.

Principle: b) The person nearing the end of their life must be treated with dignity in all circumstances, including when there is limited personal awareness. This dignity must be maintained after death.

Principle: c) People are entitled to appropriate forms of practical support and an empathic caring presence.

Principle: d) It is common to observe that people who are reaching the end of their lives send out signals in words and behaviors of their awareness of impending death. It is important for these signals to be recognized and sensitively responded to by all concerned. It is easy for others to decide that they know what these signals mean without simply asking the person themselves. Proper recognition

of signals will often have profound decision making and existential significance.

Assumption: Sudden, unexpected, and untimely losses deprive people of the opportunity to share and prepare themselves for the existential implications of loss.

Principle: a) Both individuals and communities need help and support to anticipate and cope with unwanted change and loss. Appropriate rituals can provide the context of meaning which facilitates existential review at such times.

Assumption: Dying, death, and bereavement challenge the emphasis on individual control that is an evolving hallmark of the dominant world view evident in modern societies.

Principle: a) Individual persons need support appropriate to their needs while maintaining autonomy and dignity.

Assumption: Human beings are meaning seekers from an early age and the potential for this search continues throughout life.

Principle: a) Children and adolescents ask questions about meaning formally and informally and their questions should be acknowledged and respected in an age appropriate way.

Principle: b) Ideally all families should foster the existential questioning process of children.

Principle: c) Schools should include in their curriculum the opportunity for students to explore existential questions.

Principle: d) The education of health professionals should encompass the theory and practice of listening and responding to existential questions.

Principle: e) The collective wisdom of the elderly should be regarded as a resource in the exploration of existential questions and answers.

Principle: f) The media should be encouraged to raise the awareness of the community through presentations which explore existential questions.

Principle: g) Existential concerns expressed by human beings are serious research questions.

For further information, refer to the other International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement documents listed below.

1. Assumptions and Principles Regarding Bereavement. *The R.V.H. Manual on Palliative Hospice Care*, New York: Arno. pp. 420–428, 1980.
2. Assumptions and Principles of Spiritual Care. *Death Studies*, 14(1), 75–81, 1990.
3. A Statement of Assumptions and Principles Concerning Education about Death, Dying and Bereavement for Professionals in Health Care and Human Services. *Omega*, 23(3), 235–239, 1991.

This paper was developed by the Work Group on Existential Questions and Their Moral Implications at meetings of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement. The Work Group members are:

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