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Implications of meaninglessness in anxiety

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze from an existential point of view the sources of anxiety and depression of modern man. Over time, both anxiety and depression have been lived and approached as one of the individual's maladaptations to the outside world, as its inability to create a balance between the outside world and the inner world.

Every citizen of our society realizes, based on his own experience as well as by observing his peers, that anxiety and depression are ubiquitous. We are becoming more and more aware not only of the obvious situations of creating anxiety and depression today, such as the threats of war, the uncontrolled atomic bomb and of the radical political and economic upheavals but also of the least obvious but extremely profound, namely inner confusion, psychological disorientation and uncertainty about acceptable standards of conduct. Despite the fact that anxiety and depression have become a central issue in some of the cultural dimensions of our existence, often, addressing the issues has been hampered by a lack of coordination between these theories and approaches. In this sense, one of the remarkable and extremely useful works in creating an integrative vision of anxiety is the work of Rollo May, „*The meaning of anxiety*”, which we will frequently quote in the chapter on anxiety. Thus, the paper debates and analyzes the concept of „meaning and purpose in one's own life ” and how its existence or absence influences the individual's ability to live a state of mental balance. Throughout the paper, we will review the main approaches and theories on anxiety and depression in order to have a broader perspective on the evolution of their understanding both from the point of view of psychologically and in terms of inner life. We aim to highlight the usefulness and contribution of integrative existential analysis in psychotherapeutic support for addressing anxiety and depression. Methodological support for the connection between living the existential meaning, anxiety and depression will be addressed in the chapter destined for it by which we aim to analyze the connection between the three variables and the way they are influenced.

Keywords: existential meaning, anxiety, existential anxiety, fear of being

Introduction

We live in paradoxical times when technology and the information explosion give us the opportunity to communicate but it seems to hinder our ability to see each other. Everything we dared to be once seems to appear in the form of the lives of those around us, it seems to be

more outside and less inside us. We become more and more skilled in creating a life and more clumsy in living it.

It is obvious in terms of the results of recent statistics and personally, I can notice in the professional activity within the psychotherapy office, the fact that we are increasingly facing depressive and anxiety pathology.

There has been a lot of talk and it is certainly an obvious aspect that the experience of the pandemic has imprinted and contributed to the intensification or onset of latent forms of anxiety.

And then, I can't help but wonder if man's withdrawal from the tumult of everyday life, his forcing to bring himself closer, to face each other with his own being, the questions that were born from this meeting, have not all this been a trigger for the existential wilderness encountered in various forms of anxiety and existential depression? How did the man find himself in this inner dialogue?

It also arouses my attention to the concern for the reaction of many of those I work with and who, when faced with their own helplessness, end their speech with a question, as common as it is edifying: „What's the point ...?“

This is the argument that supports the theoretical path, the analysis and the searches that this paper proposes.

Thus, the purpose is to assess the extent to which existence or lack of meaning influences the mental balance of the individual and then to meet patients who face problems of meaning and value of their own life.

Although lack of meaning can make the man sick, it does not necessarily have to. The fact that existential frustration is not a disease does not mean by far that it could not endanger man's mental balance and even life.

I find Victor Frankl's vision in this sense significant in „Theory and Therapy of Neuroses, introduction to Existential Analysis and Logotherapy“:

„If we cannot call existential frustration as inevitably pathogenic, but only optionally pathogenic, we can give it as pathological. Undevent pathogenic existential frustration, but signaling a gentle, smooth evolution, however, has no less than noogenic neurosis need existential analysis. However, then the existential analysis is not a therapy of neuroses and therefore no territory reserved for the doctor. But it looks just as much at the philosopher and theologian, the pedagogue and the psychologist, because as well as the doctors, they must be concerned with doubt about the meaning of existence.“

The meaning of life is constantly changing, but it never ceases to exist. This is evident in the many experiences in which people have been hard tried and in which they have found in their will the ability to give meaning and adopt their own attitude in the face of life.

Testimony in this regard is the so-called limit situations (war prisoners, concentration camps). They confirm how correct and important Friedrich Nietzsche said: „Only those who have to live a << why >> support almost any <<how >>.“

„Anxiety is not a feeling among other feelings, such as pleasure or sadness. It is rather an ontological characteristic of man, rooted in his very existence. Anxiety is not confused with any marginal threat, which I may or may not consider, nor with any reaction among other types of reactions in the body. Anxiety always comes with a threat to the fundamental (center) our existence. She is the experience of the threat from the inevitable non-being“ (Rollo May, p. 140)

Translating the fear of life through an existential anxiety we can approach its ontological characteristic by putting ourselves in front of terminological problems. Thus, for anxiety, Freud,

Binswanger, Goldstein, Kirkegaard, use the term „Angst”, a word that has no equivalent in other languages. It has been translated many times through terms such as „fear” or „angos”. Perhaps none of the terms is enough to highlight the fear of life, the inability to act freely and to manifest your full potential. What seems closer to the truth is that it is a living of a threat that involves fear and anguish, it is the experience of the most painful threat, being endangered by the being itself. This state always involves an inner conflict facing a tension between being and non-being.

Looking at the early experiences of the human being we can understand that the first prototype of anxiety is the trauma of birth. Given a possible interpretation, based on the etymological meaning of anxiety, (in Latin „angere” – „to compress”, „hold tight”) we can create a similarity to the suffering experienced by the baby at birth. In fact, in the opinion of Otto Rank, one of the pioneers of existential psychotherapy, any kind of trauma is rooted in the trauma of birth. The bridge can be represented in this sense by the idea of having a pressure „to give birth” to some potentialities. In this way, it becomes obvious the reason why anxiety is so closely related to the idea of freedom. Kierkegaard manages to render this connection and implication very well „Anxiety represents the reality of freedom as a potential before this freedom materializes” (Roll May, 2013, p. 144).

Given this perspective, we understand that when the individual is facing the problem of realizing his potential, he enters a state of anxiety. The individual does not stop in this state and as he finds that he fails to reach his potential, when he denies this possibility, he is filled with the feeling of guilt that represents, and it, an ontological feature of existence.

I will continue by citing a passage from Rollo May's work, „Discovery of Being”, in which he renders a fragment of Medard Boss's philosophical vision expressed through an extremely suggestive case of a patient suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder:

„This patient, himself a doctor by profession, washes compulsively on his hands. He had already been in two other types of therapy – Freudian and Jungian. He had for a while an obsessive dream about church towers. In Freudian analysis, they were interpreted as phallic symbols, while the Jungian therapist found here some archetypal religious symbols. Even though the patient could talk intelligently and for a long time about these interpretations, his compulsive neurotic behavior bothered him just as much, although he had initially enjoyed a period of calm. In the first months of his therapy with Boss, the patient reported another recurring dream in which he approached the door of a toilet, but it was always locked. Boss just asked him every time why the door needed to be locked - why „had to be pulled the lock” to use the therapist's words. Eventually, the patient had a dream in which he managed to enter that door. Inside he saw himself in the middle of a church covered in excrement and tied to the middle with a rope pulling him up when the bells rang. The patient was tied up and pulled so hard that he feared he would be torn to pieces. Over the next four days, he suffered a psychotic episode during which time Boss remained at the head of his bed and then the analysis continued, leading to a very good result.

In discussing this case, Boss notes that his patient felt guilty that he had „locked” some of his defining potentials. So he was suffering from existential guilt. We are talking about a „failure” in the development of our being or a „forgetfulness of being”, as Boss calls it, when we are not able to fulfill our being, to be authentic and to avoid falling into conformity and the anonymity of „se” (das Man)”. If we block our potentials, then we will be guilty of (or responsible for, how the original German expression can be translated), which was given to us from the beginning, in „the core” of our being. On this existential state of guilt (or liability), all

feelings of guilt are based in the countless forms and deformations under which this state” can be updated, Boss observes. And this is exactly what happened to his patient. He „had” both the bodily and spiritual potentialities of the experience (aspects related to „impulses” and those related to „divinity”, in terms of Boss). Initially, the patient had accepted the explanations in libido terms, respectively in archetypal terms, about which he knew everything that could be known. But this was actually the best way to get around the whole problem, as Boss observes. Since the patient does not assume these bodily and spiritual potentials at the level of his existence, he was at fault and responsible for himself. From here started his neurosis and psychosis”.

This existential approach manages to illuminate much of the psychological approach to guilt.

The approach to ontological fault highlights various forms of its manifestation: the fault that comes from blocking its own potential and, the fault of not taking the bodily aspects of life, the fault of the lack of integration of various intellectual or religious aspects, the ontological guilt felt in relation to our fellow men, as well as the guilt of separation from nature which is very well expressed in the words of Anaximandru, one of the first philosophers of ancient Greece, which May also quotes in support of the ontological vision of guilt: „The principle of all things is infinite or unlimited. For from where they are born they must return. Thus, all things pay, each in turn, for the injustices done to others over time” (Rollo May, 2013, p. 149).

In concluding the chapter, in order to represent as obvious as possible the fundamental relationship between man and freedom, I will render the biblical myth of the expulsion of man from heaven, as Erich Fromm presented in his book „Escape”:

„Myth identifies the beginning of human history with an act of choice, but emphasizes its sin through the act of freedom and suffering that results from it. Man and woman live in the Garden of Eden in complete harmony with each other and with nature. Peace reigns and there is no need for work; there is no choice, no freedom, no thinking. Man is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge, good, and evil. He acts against God's command, and emerges from the state of harmony with the nature of which he is part without transcending it. From the perspective of the Church, which represented authority, this is an essential sin. From a human perspective, however, this is the beginning of human freedom. Action against God's points means the deliverance of man from coercion, emerging from the unconscious existence of prehuman life and stepping on the human level. Acting against the order of authority, committing a sin, is, in its human positive aspect, the first act of freedom, that is, the first human act. The myth says that this sin comes from the fact that man was incarnated from the Tree of Knowledge. The act of disobedience as an act of freedom is the beginning of reason. The myth speaks of other consequences of the first act of freedom. The original harmony between man and nature broke. God declares war between man and woman and war between nature and man. Man became separate from nature, and took the first step toward becoming human by becoming „individual”. He committed the first act of freedom. The myth emphasizes the suffering resulting from this act. Transcendent of nature alienating from nature and another human being, the man awoke, ashamed. He is alone and free, yet helpless and frightened. Newly gained freedom seems like a curse to him; he is free in relation to the sweet bondage of paradise, but he is not free to lead himself, to realize his individuality” (Fromm, 2013, p. 48-49).

The aim of the paper: We aim to analyze the connection between anxiety and the presence of existential meaning.

Hypothesis: In this research, we started with the following hypothesis: It is presumed that there is a correlation between existential meaning and anxiety.

Tools: to verify hypotheses we used the following tools:

I. ESK existential scale (Langle, Orgler and Kundi – 2000)

The existential scale is a self-assessment scale, which measures the person's existential personal skills. These existential personal skills refer to our relationship with the world and with ourselves. The scale contains 46 items that must be evaluated on a 6-point Likert scale (1-always, 6-never). The scale has 4 subscales and formulates the necessary conditions for a meaningful life. The first two subscales – self-distance and self-transmission – measure personal skills, and the other two – freedom and responsibility – measure the person's existential skills.

1. *Self-distance (SD)* means the person's ability to distance himself from his own desires, emotions, and goals and thereby see and perceive the current situation in its reality. Low SD values indicate an „inner constraint”, which is manifested in the person's exaggerated self-concernment, in the exaggerated concern for the person's feelings and decisions. Extremely high SD values indicate that the person has come to deny their own needs and feelings. People with high SD values are characterized by excessive rigidity and severity. The self-distance subscale includes 8 items.

2. *Self-transcendence (ST)* means the person's ability to feel values and free emotionality, which manifests itself nearby and empathy, in emotional participation and addressability to values. Self-transcendence means the accessibility of the person from the world. Low ST values indicate poor relationships and a lack of emotional resonance. Extremely high values indicate an exaggeration of emotional closeness. The self-transcendence subscale includes 14 items.

3. *Freedom (F)* means the ability to discover in everyday life the possibilities of action and their hierarchy according to values, on the basis of which we can make a personal decision. Low subscale values indicate inability to decide and uncertainty, and extremely high values indicate critical and dominant behavior, persons with high values refuse any situations that include internal or external constraints. The Freedom Subscale includes 11 items.

4. *Responsibility (R)* means the capacity on the basis of which we are firmly and prudently committed to our values and obligations. Low R values indicate a deficient or inhibited commitment. Extremely high values indicate a consistent and self-disciplined person. The Responsibility Subscale includes 13 items.

The sum of the values of the 4 subscales gives the global value (the value G). The G value means the person's ability to take a position on the offers and expectations of life and to build a meaningful life based on authenticity.

III. STAI– Y Anxiety Inventory (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Y Form)

STAI-Y is the revised and improved form and is considered one of the best psychometric tools for assessing anxiety in adults. STAI inventory, Form Y has 40 items, which are divided into two scales: Anxiety as State (Form Y-1) – assesses the temporary condition of anxiety, characterized by subjective feelings of tension, mistrust, nervousness and worry and by activating or exciting the central nervous system. The Y-1 form consists of the first 20 items, which have as response variants: 1 = Not at all, 2 = Little, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Very much. Anxiety as a Feature (Y-2) – measures anxiety as a general trait, which denotes stable relative individual differences in predisposition to anxiety and refers to the general tendency to feel anxiety in

threatening situations in the environment. The Y-2 form consists of the last 20 items, which have response options: 1 = Almost never, 2 = Sometimes 3 = Often, 4 = Almost always.

Verification of hypotheses:

It is presumed that there is a correlation between existential meaning and anxiety.

Table 1. Analysis of the normality of the variables, using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test.

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
scala_existentiala	,074	60	,200*	,961	60	,051
stare_anxietate	,129	60	,015	,938	60	,004

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Graphic representation of variable distributions

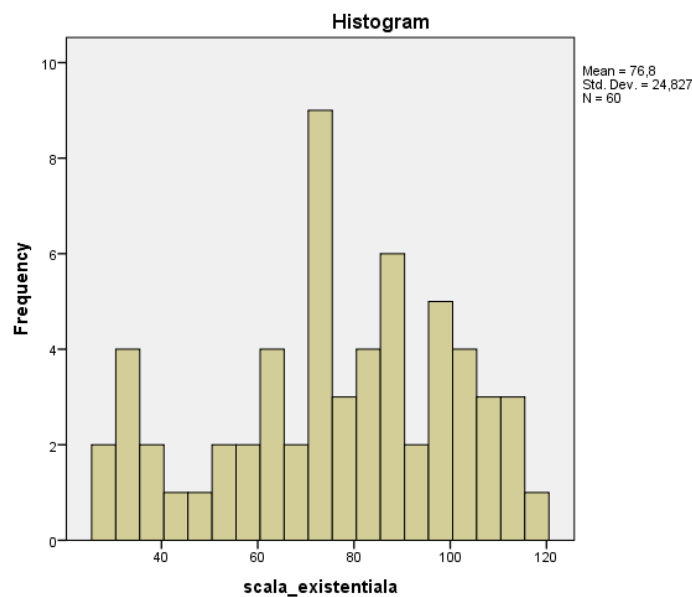


Fig.2. Histogram for existential scale

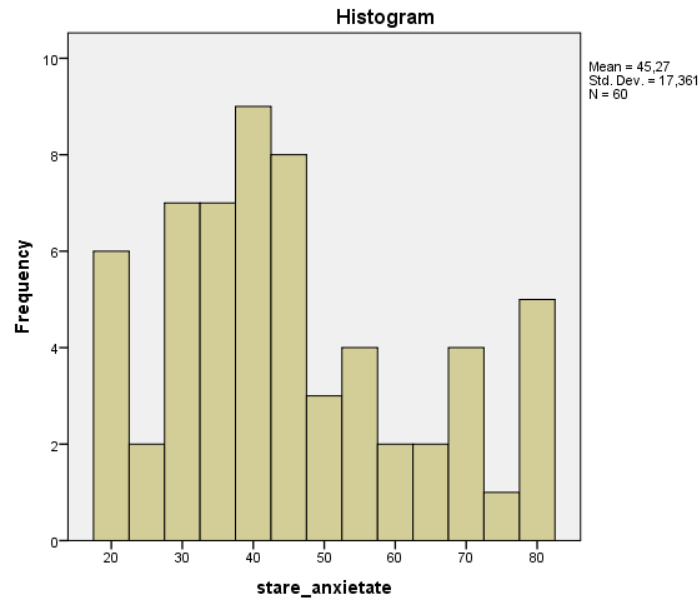


Fig.3. Histogram for anxiety

Table no.4. Correlation of variables using the Spearman test for non-normal distributions (one of the scales does not comply with the normal distribution)

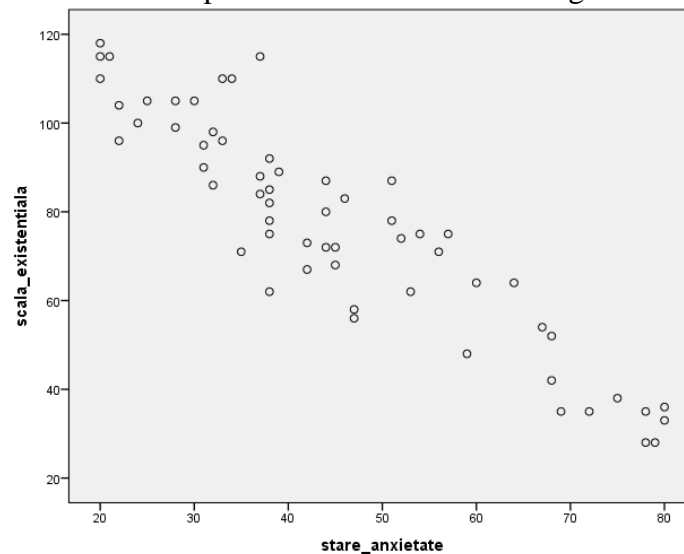
Correlations

		scala_existentia	stare_anxietate
Spearman's rho	scala_existentia	1,000	-,902**
			,000
		60	60
	stare_anxietate	-,902**	1,000
		,000	.
		60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the values obtained and played above it results that there is a significant correlation between the existential meaning and anxiety.

Figure 5. Cloud of points for existential meaning and anxiety



The point cloud is the graphical representation of the correlation between the two variables. The representation of the points in the histogram in the figure shows a significant correlation between the two variables. The hypothesis that there is a correlation between the two variables is confirmed.

Conclusions

In conclusion, based on the arguments supported theoretically but also through research, we can support the implication of the presence of existential meaning in the manifestations of anxiety and anxiety.

Living the full feeling that life has meaning and coherence for the individual, involves some general aspects related to man's ability to be, the pleasure of being and permission to be.

Existence refers to a life lived in freedom and responsibility and the freedom to act can be influenced by the way the individual perceives the obstacles that arise and that block the smooth flow of life.

Consistency and inner agreement are lacking when man feels danger in his own life and in the absence of agreement, the meaning and meaning of life are lost or faded.

When we talk about anxiety we talk about the fear of being, we are talking about the lack of support, space and safety.

Man has on his side the cognition and perception on the basis of which he perceives life as dangerous, difficult and threatening or can perceive it as a gift, the privilege of being.

When we relate fear to the obstacles of life, there is helplessness and most of the time the mechanisms by which man defends himself against them. All this removes the individual from the possibility of assuming the situation and personal helplessness. Over time, the resources needed to deal with these obstacles no longer cope and man remains face to face with his own helplessness, thus generating the germs of anxious living.

For a good confrontation with these situations, in order to be able to bear or accept it takes courage because the assumption and acceptance of one's own life requires courage. Given the lack of existential meaning, as we have observed throughout the theoretical and research path, dimensions such as self-distance, self-transcension, freedom and responsibility are missing or poorly accessed.

In the absence of the ability to live in freedom, in accordance with one's own values and what is his own, man lives the insecurity and difficulty of deciding for him. In this freezing and lack of decision, he becomes fearful and anxious.

The same situation occurs in the case of liability. Responsibility for one's own life means the possibility of firmly engaging in the direction of our values but also our obligations. In the absence of personal responsibility for one's own life, man lives life beside him. He will avoid or act against obstacles, turning helplessness into weaknesses, and living his own life with fear.

In conclusion, when we talk about the human being, we are talking about a dynamic process. This is not automatically revealed, but this process of becoming is closely related to the essential element of self-awareness. It is the responsibility of the human being to become himself, and this responsibility, often, he freezes man in the face of life because he can through the choices he makes give up his being. It is a pendulum between being and not being, a choice made moment by moment.

The fear of life is the mechanism by which the process of becoming a being is immobilized, It is the fear of freedom, the fear of daring to be, to seek your meaning and look upon yourself as a being entitled to manifest its uniqueness. It is an organic fear that holds you captive in an existential neurosis that annihilates the ability to advance from desire to action, it is a experience of a threat that presupposes fear and fear, it is the experience of the most painful threat, being endangered by the being itself. This state always involves an inner conflict facing a tension between being and non-being.

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