



Review

Existential anxiety and sense of guilt for mental health

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Abstract

Living without meaning, purpose, values, or ideals causes significant anxiety. Because it is impossible to design life in advance, individuals have to create their own meanings. "Feeling guilt for being" suggested by existential theorists contradicts the sense of incompleteness or the fact that we are not who we should be. It is about noticing the fact that our actions and choices mean far less than our full being as individuals. This sense of guilt is neither considered neurotic nor a symptom that needs to be treated. Existential guilt is something more than a distressing affective state, a symptom that needs to be studied and eradicated.

Keywords: A feeling of guilt; existential anxiety; mental health.

What is presently known on this subject?

- In case this state is considered significant, it shall be considered as a heartfelt voice that will act as a guide to personal fulfillment.

What does this article add to the existing knowledge?

- It is known that the person's pathological anxiety and feelings of guilt threaten the protection of mental health. Knowing the existential form of anxiety and guilt instead of its pathological form and arranging life according to this form can increase the quality of life by contributing to the protection and development of mental health.

What are the implications for practice?

- It is thought that mental health professionals will increase their awareness on the subject and that interventions in the light of this information in practice will contribute to the therapeutic process.

A person always feels the need to understand and make sense of life.^[1] Existential philosophy, which arises from this search for meaning of man, attempts to understand him with what is emerging, what is happening, that is, as a being, instead of considering him as a single person.^[2] This situation confronts man, as the only creature who realizes his/her existence, with many questions regarding his/her own existence and leads him to questioning.^[1,2] His/her search for meaning is natural and normal. Man feels anxiety when his/her cannot find satisfactory answers to his/her existential questions.^[1] This experienced anxiety is a subjective situation in which the per-

son is aware that he/she may lose his/her existence, that he/she may lose himself and his/her world, and that he/she will be "nothing." In other words, anxiety is the experience of the impending threat of nonexistence. A person has the freedom to realize a new potential in this experience process. However, when a person denies this new potential and fails to realize it, he/she experiences guilt.^[3] Yalom (2013) stated that every person is born with a certain capacity and secret from birth and that the person in question experiences a sense of guilt when he/she is not successful in living his/her life to the fullest. That is, a person does not feel guilty only toward others but also toward himself. The anxiety and guilt experienced can sometimes grow so much that as a result, the person decides to end his/her life. In this context, people need guides so they can direct their lives according to such guides.^[4]

Nursing is one of the professions that internalize the responsibility of people and society in terms of health services, which have an important place in human life.^[2] Nurses contribute to the quality of health care by clarifying existential problems, raising awareness about what existential problems are, and drawing attention to problems^[5] because the main field of interest of both existential theory and nursing is human and human life.^[2] Nurse theorists have developed their own theories

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Submitted Date: September 17, 2021 **Revised Date:** May 18, 2022 **Accepted Date:** June 19, 2022 **Available Online Date:** December 12, 2022

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while evaluating existential anxiety. Furthermore, many theorists have been influenced by the thoughts and ideas of existential theorists in the process of forming their basic concepts. For example, according to Travelbee's theory, man comes to the world once, has his/her own characteristics and is unlike anyone else, is irreplaceable, exists, develops, and changes. When it comes to the theory of existence, which is used to understand the individual with a mental disorder in clinical practice, because each person is a different entity, stereotypes should be avoided in the approach to the individual, and the individual should be involved as responsible. By gaining knowledge regarding the factors that prevent the individual's existence process, he/she can be helped to gain and use his/her freedom. Here the nurse's role is to actively participate in the development of the individual and share his/her feelings.

^[6] At the same time, nurses, while assuming the responsibilities of the individuals they provide care services to, must first get to know them and understand their feelings and preferences. Thus, they will also assist the individuals they care for to take on their own responsibilities.^[2] In this way, the individual will face his/her anxiety and continue his/her life freely.

The way to live meaningfully is to live life more effectively without feeling any pressure. A life away from this kind of life creates anxiety in individuals. The further one moves away from his/her inner world, the more he/she will distance himself from the world. In today's world, where most things are lived and quickly consumed, it is not easy for a person to adapt to this process, add meaning to his/her life, and cope with what life brings. Being able to have deep and meaningful contacts with people in challenging moments, in the environments in which they interact, and with the people they interact with can be facilitated by confronting the four ultimate anxieties of existence. It should not be forgotten that the anxiety experienced especially in situations that the person perceives as a threat to his/her existence is existential anxiety that contributes to the development of the person, and the process experienced is normal. Again, it can be thought that the existential form of guilt does not develop due to the mistakes of the person but only due to the lack of awareness of such person.

In this article, the effects of experiencing anxiety and guilt in different ways on mental health, and it is aimed to shed light on nursing practices.

The Concept of Guilt

Guilt is defined as a strong and intense emotion that arises when a person does not act in accordance with his/her values, judgments, or social standards and thinks that he/she violates such values and standards.^[7] Apart from basic emotions, guilt requires a high level of cognitive structure and self-awareness. In other words, a person evaluates the negative situation he/she is in and notices that it is incompatible with the self-concept.^[8] In addition, the feeling of guilt is closely related to the perception of control, such as anger. However, anger is the feeling that the person directs to the outside, whereas guilt

is the feeling that he/she directs to his/her inner world. Moreover, emotions such as anger and guilt are used to manage people's emotions.^[9]

From the evolutionary perspective, guilt is a harmonious and social emotion that protects a person from others. In addition, some theories argued that guilt functions as an emotion regulation, protects the person from criminal behaviors, and directs his/her to positive behaviors.^[7] Conceptually, guilt is linked to gratitude and responsibility. A guilty person has a responsibility to be forgiven and to compensate for the harm he/she has caused to others.^[10] In the psychodynamic theory, which dealt with and first formulated the guilt most comprehensively, the relationship with concepts such as melancholy, neurosis, and masochism was emphasized.^[7,11] According to Freud, guilt is the conflict of id and ego actions with the moral standards of the superego.^[7] That is, the internalization of the aggressive impulse and its orientation to the ego under the name of conscience is associated with the need for punishment.^[12] On the other hand, Adler stated that guilt stems from inferiority complex.^[13]

Horney discusses guilt within the scope of neuroses and mentions three tendencies related to the pursuit of glory created by self-idealization: the need for perfection, neurotic ambition, and vengeful victory. He/she stated that these tendencies are compelling in nature as they are both a neurotic solution and an intrinsic necessity of the neurotic structure.^[12] Horney stated that the individual must strictly adhere to these compelling tendencies by ignoring his/her wishes, feelings, or interests; otherwise, he/she will struggle with the feeling of guilt by worrying and experiencing conflict. Moreover, Horney stated that the depressed individual consciously hates and blames himself but unconsciously hates and blames an enemy specified inside.^[14]

Erikson's assertiveness versus guilt phase refers to the period in which the child is curious and asks endless questions to his/her parents to get rid of it.^[15] At this stage, while the child's initiatives increase in line with his/her preferences and goals, different purposes such as leaving home should be stopped.^[16] Scolding, stigmatizing, prohibiting, or punishing these entrepreneurial behaviors aimed at recognizing life by the parents will cause the child to experience guilt.^[15] However, at this stage, both sexes have a strong desire to be a prince or a princess. They feel guilty when their aggressive attempts to make the world their own are suspended, and they cause damage to their environment.^[16] Berne stated that if parents approach their children with a strict and prescriptive parent ego, the child's and parents' egos will clash, and as a result, the child will feel guilty.^[9] According to Bowlby, meeting the needs of the child without delay makes his/her feel valued and lovable. At this stage, positive or negative experiences that are closely related to the attachment process constitute self-representations. The development of attachment with negative experiences causes the child to develop a feeling of rejection and inadequacy, and then the guilt feeling experienced causes problems in interpersonal relationships.^[17]

Evaluation of the Concept of Guilt Regarding Existential Theory

Existential theory is a theory that investigates the existence of man and questions the place of man both in the world and the universe.^[18] May defined three different ontological feelings of guilt associated with each mode of being and stated that these three modes cannot be perfectly experienced. According to May, as a result of the progress of civilization and the development of technology, people are getting more and more distant from nature. This alienation leads to ontological guilt, especially in developed societies. Furthermore, the feeling of guilt arises in one's own inner relationship. That is, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot satisfactorily use all his/her preferences and innate potentials. In this case, the subjective world of the person and the social world are denied. When one chooses to deny this feeling, it turns into a pathological guilt. This leads to non-productive neurotic symptoms such as sexual inadequacy, depression, abusive behavior toward others, or indecisiveness.^[15,19]

According to Maslow, if a person denies or suppresses his/her innate essence, sometimes overtly and sometimes secretly, he/she becomes ill. The inner core, due to being sensitive, can easily be under the influence of cultural suppression. Even if denied, it continues to force for existence and realization. Every act and crime committed against the nature of the person is unconsciously recorded, which causes the person to belittle himself.^[20] Heidegger pointed out that existential guilt is an ontic phenomenon summarized as the voice of the human conscience that indicates guilt. This is based on the assumption that the guilty person sees himself as deficient and blames himself for this defect.^[10] Otto Rank, on the other hand, argued that human life is lived and exhausted very fast, and the unexperienced things cause the person to feel guilty.^[20]

According to Frankl, when people become alienated and unable to attach meaning to the world they live in, they begin to question the meaning of life and whether it is worth living. He/she also stated that the person facing the expectation of death asks himself questions like, "Is there anything else I can do until I die? Will I be forgotten when I die? If there is death, why do I occupy myself with anything?" Such a sense of meaninglessness is the main existential neurosis of the world today. This meaninglessness in life leads to existential emptiness.^[21] Tillich also stated that death anxiety, in which absence threatens existence, is not actually related to an abnormal state of mind, as is neurotic anxiety.^[3]

Self-Actualization and Existential Guilt in the Context of Existential Anxiety

The existential approach focuses on the conflicts experienced by people who face the benefits of existence. He/she stated that man fights with four ultimate anxieties, namely, death, freedom, isolation (loneliness), and meaninglessness, and

noted that confronting one of them constitutes the content of existential conflict.^[22] This conflict between existence and nonexistence involves two opposing potential situations. The first of these is the possibility of completing the individual's existence. Second, it involves destroying the individual's security, so that the individual rejects his/her new potential.^[3]

According to Rank, every human being is born with the conflict created by the opposite tendencies experienced in the form of dependence and independence or submission and self-direction. He argued that the transition to postnatal conditions requiring effort and intervention after life in the mother's womb creates horror in the baby.^[23] Freud and Rank argued that birth is the prototype of all anxieties, and they consider that this is the basis of reality.^[3] He/she said that the desire to forget this traumatic event has a universal character, and therefore, people carry the frightening traces of their birth to the unconscious. Rank identifies this as the primary suppression mechanism. According to him, suppressed primary anxiety will be re-experienced in various ways as a result of the conflict between the desire to return to the mother's womb and the fear that this return will end with the same pain and will perpetuate its effect on behavior.^[23] He/she assumed that this is the reason why anxiety and the problem of freedom are fundamentally linked.^[3]

Existential guilt, the feeling that a person feels about the unexperienced, activates the person who is trying to exist by feeling the four ultimate anxieties.^[24,25] The person who feels this anxiety wants to be "authentic" against the uncertainties that make it difficult to be in the world, and for this, he/she deals with the inner distress caused by not being himself. Guilt is the struggle for human existence and the individual who realizes his/her struggles with this situation.^[25] The fact that one is held responsible for choices, lifestyles, and behaviors causes freedom to existentially cause anxiety. The phenomenon conceptualized here as ontological crime is a different phenomenon from "experiencing a sense of guilt. Because the person is guilty."^[26] This anxiety experienced by the person after he/she discovers that there is no meaning in his/her life, and the subsequent demand for meaning, is "a true expression of humanity." In other words, it refers to the return of the human being to the basic question of his/her existence, which he/she forgot or postponed in the fast flow of life.^[1]

In the Gestalt approach, it is stated that all living things have two main purposes: the first is to survive, and the second is to grow and develop. Another important point is that all living things are programmed for self-actualization.^[27] Self-actualization is an effort to develop and a motive that directs human behavior, as well as a level of development that is sought to be reached.^[28]

According to Horney, psychopathology occurs in adverse conditions that prevent the child from growing up to realize his or her latencies. By losing his/her potential self, the child directs his/her life energy to his/her ideal self, which is another self-image. Furthermore, on an unconscious level,

man constantly compares his/her potential self with his/her real self. The incompatibility between what is and what can be shows the feeling of self-contempt that one has to deal with throughout life.^[20] However, May stated that a person is unable to return himself to his/her whole being, that he/she cannot be real, and that he/she will experience failure to the extent of his/her being that he/she has forgotten by taking refuge in conformist anonymity. He/she argued that when a person keeps his/her secrets under a lock, he/she will feel guilty or debted to everything, and this existential experience of guilt or debt composes the basis of all feelings of guilt.^[3]

Reflections of Existential Anxiety and Guilt on Mental Health

The existential vacuum is a common phenomenon of the 21st century. Schopenhauer argued that humanity is bound to oscillate endlessly between the two extremes of anxiety and boredom. He/she gets rid of the busy work schedule that people experience on weekdays and evaluates the emptiness that becomes evident on holidays as holiday depression. Existential emptiness is behind many suicides, depression, aggression, and substance abuse. This also applies to crises experienced by pensioners and older people.^[29] Filling this gap is possible by searching for meaning in life.

The existential dimension, which includes the search for meaning in life, has a protective effect on mental health.^[30] Existential theorists Heidegger, Tillich, Maslow, and May answer the questions "How will man find his/her secret? How does one realize that he/she has lost his/her way?" with answers like "Through guilt! Through anxiety! By the call of consciousness!" These people consider existential guilt as a constructive force and a guide to the person. Horney, on the other hand, said to clients who do not know what they want, "Have you ever thought of asking yourself?" and thus human himself stood at the center of existence. May defined existential guilt as "a positive constructive emotion, the perception of the difference between what something is and what it should be" and argued that existential guilt is essential for mental health.^[20]

According to existential theorists, most people prefer to avoid freedom and responsibilities to get rid of their anxiety about existence. This causes him to develop defense mechanisms.^[22,26] Thus, these people preferred to deceive themselves. In other words, they prefer the non-me, thinking that they are not free and are unable to do something, that what they want to do cannot be done, that they must make sacrifices. For example, people with psychosis have chosen an unreal life. They live in an unreal world, as the real world hurts them, and cannot take on the responsibilities of this world. They do not know what the world they live in is because they chose not to.^[31] According to Yalom, the purpose of psychotherapy is to give or take responsibility to client or to ensure he/she takes responsibility. When a person takes full responsibility for his/her actions, the field of guilt expands. This guilt derives from failing to fulfill

one's responsibilities to oneself rather than from failing to fulfill one's responsibilities to a moral or social law.^[22]

Death anxiety, which is one of the main issues of mental health, gains more importance today as it is the common point of all abnormal and worrying anxieties. Death anxiety, which is described as the primary source of anxiety, is a positive anxiety as it gives meaning to life according to the existential theory. According to Yalom, while a person uses his/her life energy to cope with death anxiety, he/she also acts in an effort to enrich his/her life. It includes existential elements such as anxiety about seeking meaning in life and death, thoughts about death, meaninglessness, and guilt. In a study investigating the relationship between death anxiety and psychopathology, anxiety, somatization, and phobic avoidance reactions were found to be positively associated with death anxiety.^[30] The same structure is observed in the pathological form of self-condemnation and guilt anxiety. Existential guilt will distract the person from guilt and anxiety and enable him/her to discipline herself/himself morally. Meanwhile, a person is aware that the imperfection arising from his/her existence here cannot be completely eliminated. In the pathological state, the individual's guilt anxiety and fear of excommunication are so strong that it is almost impossible to make responsible decisions and take moral action. Because it is inevitable to make decisions and take action in this situation, the person reduces his/her decisions and behaviors but perceives them as perfect. In addition, he/she acts defensively against all attempts to overcome this situation. That is, guilt anxiety is misplaced. Even in the absence of guilt, guilt anxiety is experienced. Anxieties of guilt and self-reproach stemming from human existence are suppressed by the neurotic person who does not have the courage to face them.^[32]

Conclusion

Man tries to exist both by adding meaning to the changing world and by coping with the four ultimate concerns. In this process of reorganizing one's own life, existential guilt can be considered as a guide that disciplines life. By enabling the person to review himself in a situation he/she has lived through, it provides the opportunity to examine the emotion he/she has experienced and the action he/she has taken. With this evaluation process, the person resolves past conflicts and eliminates the pain of disappointments. The important thing here is that the person realizes the abnormal, normal, and existential forms of guilt. With this awareness, one faces the four ultimate concerns, does not deceive himself, and sees the world as it is. Faced with the fear of death, the person acts with the awareness that life has a limited time and tries to live his/her life in a more planned way. In other words, the person lives more freely as the responsibility of his/her life.

Conflict of interest: There are no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Authorship contributions: Concept – S.Ö.; Design – S.Ö.; Supervision – E.E.; Analysis and/or interpretation – S.Ö.; Literature search – S.Ö.; Writing – S.Ö.; Critical review – E.E.

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