

Love and its shadows

Emmy van Deurzen offers some existential perspectives on relationship therapy

The existential view of the world is philosophical. Looking at human relationships, existential therapists see the paradoxes and tensions that people will inevitably struggle with. Existential relationship therapy aims to firmly grasp the nettle of these problems and put them into perspective. Existential therapists do not recoil from people's conflicts, but encourage partners who are struggling with their relationship to become more aware of the unspoken ambiguity between them. They throw light on the clashes in values and purpose that divide people and help them find a joint commitment to a project they can share. Where partners have become frightened to address their differences and have gone into hiding, so that they end up sniping at each other, existential relationship therapists will deliberately bring out all that thwarted passion to harness it again. They will delve for deeply held convictions and strongly felt sentiments, going beyond strains and pressures towards both partners' heartfelt aspirations. They work with partners in front of each other, to help them recover respect for the other.

Life, even at the best of times, is a continuous balancing act between a positive and negative pole of existence. The better we get at facing up to the dark side of life, the more intense our experience of the lighter aspects of living will be as well. Many couples learn to constrict themselves with each

other, for fear of offending. They suppress their hope and longing for a deep connection. They give up on themselves and each other and become cynical about love. In this way, they slowly but surely drift away from honest exchanges and end up avoiding and losing the other, whom, actually, they love.

An existential relationship therapist enables partners to start speaking their own truth before they begin to speak to each other in a real way once again. They have a particular perspective on life that gives them a strong foothold in reality, so they are unfazed in the face of the disagreements, frustrations, disappointments and anger that overshadow people's capacity for tenderness and affection. Existential therapists do not aim for sweet harmony, but for fairness and directness. They know that any good story is based on an artful interaction between the tensions of success and failure, fortune and misfortune, happiness and misery, or even of good and evil. And so it is in good relationships as well.

Strong relationships have weathered some fierce storms. They do not consist of a long sequence of easy days, where partners enjoy the blue skies of love and happiness without interruption. Good relationships are created, slowly but surely. They require us to address the differences and difficulties between our partner and ourselves on a daily basis. By allowing partners to re-engage with both sides

of the equation of their relationship, both love and fear, kindness and hate, there is a fair chance that the core of the relationship is allowed a chance to breathe again, enabling the love and understanding between partners to be rekindled.

The work is not about creating compromises but rather about facilitating partners to become a team again and collaborate together with mutual respect. In establishing attentiveness to each other's plight, some amount of harmony can be re-established. This allows people to learn to navigate through difficulties and adversity to find joint purpose and direction. They discover that their differences are not just difficult; they are also what make the partnership potentially strong and viable. Nature functions by differentiation. Electricity is generated when a positive charge flows to a negatively charged particle. Life events expose us to constant trials and tribulations that test our ability to become vital. We need to know how to make each other and ourselves safe, as well as finding the courage to face these difficult explorations together. The feeling of love is generated when we discover that we care as much for the other's wellbeing as for our own, and that the same is true the other way around. Fear, which is the opposite of love, arises when we feel threatened and in danger from the other's presence. Many people are content to live in muted and subdued fear in their relationship. Love never survives this for very long. They become ashamed and resentful

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about the loss of love and often begin to blame things on their partner, switching off from doing any further loving things for them. Things quickly deteriorate from there. Couples need to be given a safe space in which to understand what has happened to them. They respond well to being invited to jointly understand and take responsibility for the way in which they have been going off into a negative spiral

together, when they no longer have to be defensive or feel guilty about this. Getting some vision back into the situation allows people to let go of shame and resentment. This makes it much easier to face the important challenges, contradictions and conflicts that need to be attended to.

There are some existential concepts and ways of working that can help with this tricky process, including those of the recognition of paradox and dialectics, the connection between feelings and values, and the importance of attending to the couple's timeline and division of labour on all dimensions of existence. ●

About the author



Emmy van Deurzen is a philosopher, counselling psychologist and existential psychotherapist. She founded the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent's College, the Society for Existential Analysis and the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, of which she continues to be

principal. She was the first chair of UKCP and has chaired and directed many other organisations and institutions. She is Visiting Professor with Middlesex University and has been a professor with Regent's College, as well as Honorary Professor with the University of Sheffield and Schiller International University. She was a visiting Fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge. Her 15 books include: *Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling in Practice (3rd edition)* (Sage, 2012), *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness* (Sage, 2009), *Everyday Mysteries (2nd edition)* (Routledge, 2010) and *Paradox and Passion in Psychotherapy (2nd edition)* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). In 2013 she co-edited *Existential Perspectives on Relationship Therapy* with Susan Iacovou for Palgrave Macmillan.

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