

# EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL SUPPORT GROUPS ADDRESSED TO PARENTS OF CHILDRENS WITH VARIOUS NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS: PRINCIPLES, MODELS, IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNCTIONING FEATURES

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**ABSTRACT.** *Existential-Phenomenological Support Groups Addressed to Parents of Childrens with Various Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Principles, Models, Implementation and Functioning Features.* This article aims to present the principles, techniques and models of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling, as well as the way in which philosophical practice can be used to support discussions within support groups addressed to parents of children with disabilities. A model of philosophical existential-phenomenological group counseling will also be proposed, addressing the parents of children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. The phases of the group counseling process as well as individual counseling through phenomenology will be reproduced in this article, which will also propose possible themes that discussions in workshops with parents of children with disabilities can be based on.

**Keywords:** *philosophical counseling, existentialism, phenomenology, support groups, psychopathology*

## I. The existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling – principles, themes and models

### *a. What is existential-phenomenological therapy?*

(A) Existential therapy in particular or philosophical counseling of existential origin is a type of intervention that “seeks to help people confront themselves and find themselves through the foundation of their own existence”. Based on the premise that “existence precedes the essence”, the existential approach addresses

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topics such as “freedom”, “responsibility”, “meaning”, and “authenticity”. “The perception of others, of objects and self”, but also the relations between them, are aspects exploited in existential counseling sessions, where the individual can know and analyze the self, can identify the values and determine the alternatives he has at its current problems, on the basis of setting goals and determining the meaning of the actions in which he can invest. Of course, ethical codes or personal beliefs that support individuals' value systems must not be omitted, since they largely influence how individuals give meaning to their existence and their world.

Existential therapy is based on five principles: a) purpose and meaning guide the actions of every human being; b) to every human being is characteristic of his freedom, responsibility and ability to update his potential; c) human beings know both limitations and challenges throughout their existence, and develop according to confrontation (not abandoning or avoiding) with the experiences from which these data arise; d) The “subjective, phenomenological flow of human experiences”, involving the particular subjective experiences and senses that result from them and which each human being assumes, is “a key aspect of human existence” and one of the main objectives that psychotherapeutic intervention targets them; (e) “The human being is interconnected with – rather than separate – the” experiences “that the other participants in existence live with and the worlds they have”.

There are four large schools that are based on existentialist principles: existential analysis logotherapy, British school of existential therapy, and existential-humanistic approach.

Emotions, which guide and lead us to “actions, responsibilities and choices”, occupy an important place in existential therapy. We are talking emotions such as “shame”, “envy”, “hope”, “love”, “joy”, in the ascension to “happiness” in the order described above, which can also cause “anxiety, enthusiasm or commitment” such as “pride, jealousy, anger, fear, alienation”, which can lead to “depression, despair, disengagement”, if we consider the “compass of emotions” proposed by Duerzen and Adams (2011). It is to be noted that “any emotion indicates value and signals the nature of the anxiety or despair associated with it”.

(B) Phenomenology refers to “the study of human experience and the way things are presented to us in the experience”, but also “the study of consciousness from the perception of the world to the first person”.

Existential phenomenology is “a paradigm that contemplates the conceptualization and study of experiences” of the human being. The contribution of philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, etc., as well as some existential inspirational theoreticians / psychotherapists, such as Ludwing Binswanger, Irvin Yalom, or Rallo May, should be alerted to the conceptual and paradigmatic development of the field.

### ***b. Theories and models used in existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling sessions***

With the development of the field of existential psychotherapy, a number of theories have emerged that have come to guide the therapeutic process within this field. They are presented below.

Irvin Yalom points out the existence of “four fundamental worries” that arise from “confronting the individual with the date of existence”: (a) “Death” – as “tension” imposed on the “desire” of the individual’s life; (b) “Freedom” – which implies full responsibility, that is, unedited in one or some validated external theme, of the individual “as author, for his own world”; (c) “Isolation”, which, in the existential terms, refers to depriving the individual of “some parts of himself” but also of the others, given that he lives the existential conflict between “the awareness of absolute loneliness and the desire to contact (with others and with oneself); (d) “Lack of meaning”, a fundamental concern born of the “dilemma of a creature seeking meaning, but which is thrown into a senseless universe”. In the view of the American psychiatrist, these existential worries give rise to a “conflict” that calls for insubordination on the part of the person living it to be resolved.

The structural model proposed by Ernesto Spinelli includes three phases: a). co-creation of the therapeutic world; b). exploring the therapeutic world; c). closing the therapeutic world.

The Vocational Career Decision Making Model proposed by Cohen N. Benjamin (2003) involves four stages: (a) responsibility and freedom of decision, the assessment of the career alternatives, (b) the action (“to implement the decisions taken”), (c) re-evaluating “meanings and opportunities for a genuine existence” in relation to the decisions taken. This model aims at empowering clients with respect to the meaning of meaning and the opportunity of authentic existence.

### ***c. The process of existential-phenomenological counseling***

The existential-phenomenological counseling involves two sequences, (a) epoché, that is, “suspending judgment”, “placing in brackets” what is to be reconsidered, “consciousness and (...) confrontation of assumptions” and (c) “impressions and inquiries”, “identified in the previous phase, which also involves” exploring the meanings and (...) the link “between them, as well as the interpretation of the” meanings and meanings “of the experiences and prerequisites developed, with the aim of” acquiring “customer experience”.

Between the epoché (referring to the clarification of the experiences and premises of the client) and the verification (considering their interpretation) lies (b) the horizontalisation, ie “placing (...) the experience in a context” or within a framework reference, to facilitate the construction of a new or at least analyzed perspective on the life and existence of the individual entering the interpretative process.

In the existential counseling sessions, the emphasis is on the description (and not the identification of the causes or the “problem solving” of the client according to a predetermined pattern, type), and on equalization (consideration of “content, process and (all) experiences” and beliefs personal, described by the client as being of equal importance and relevance). According to Deurzen and Adams, description and equalization are sources of assumptions that may affect the therapeutic process if their importance is not taken into account by the therapist

#### ***d. The existential-phenomenological group philosophical counseling***

The structure of group counseling, when speaking of the existential paradigm, involves two phases: a). individual interpretation of a text or a problem (also called “idiographic level”) in an “interview”; and b). identifying “common patterns that relate to the big issue”. This second phase can take place given that interpretations associated with a “different situation (...) can be experienced in the same way” based on a common pattern, as “experimentation of the restriction” can refer to both money and on time. The importance of personal experience in starting the interpretative process is signaled by various research,.

## **II. Methods of application of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling within the support groups addressed to parents of children with disabilities**

### ***a. The existential condition of the parents of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder***

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a pervasive developmental disorder that affects 1 in 56 children, which occurs more frequently in boys than in girls (in a 4: 1 ratio), and is manifested, according to DSM-V, by: (a) “Deficits of communication and social interaction”; (b) “Stereotyped and repetitive behaviors”.

Although intervention models based on applied behavioral analysis, addressed directly to children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, have developed very rapidly and have proven their effectiveness, little attention has been paid to the

development of programs aimed at counseling parents in such a way of children. Breetton and Tonge wrote: "(...) parents and caregivers of autistic children can easily be forgotten" in favor of intervention programs for children with autism.

The high number of parents / guardians of children with disabilities experiencing "existential distress" (considering that they "live in a world of their own", that they lost the chance of a "normal life", that "society does not understand them" interpersonal and isolation from herself, her life partner, her child, or her extended family, having the belief of a "child-centered life and two lives as one" and seeing the world "turned backwards", feeling "depression, anger and hostility" and guilt "and stress) and who need to find" meaning and meaning "during the pre-post diagnosis period is reported in the literature, given the increase in the number of children born with neurodevelopment deficiencies in particular with autistic spectrum disorders) or with chronic diseases".

### ***b. Support sources for parents of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder***

"Acceptance and support from others" seems to be the promising need of families with a newly diagnosed child with autistic spectrum disorder. The importance and effectiveness of parent support groups has been shown in the literature.

Following the qualitative (phenomenological) analysis of 3637 "postings and comments" of parents of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder on two on-line support groups, Illias et al. (2017) indicated that (a) "information support" (ie information on disorder and modalities of intervention) in 30.7%, followed by (b) emotional support (27.8%) I choose these parents to socialize in order to alleviate the pain caused by the diagnosis of their children. Other research shows that family support increases the personal satisfaction and effectiveness of parents, particularly mothers, in managing their own emotions related to the condition that a child with autistic spectrum disorder implies. (c) Support from friends (68%) or (d) other families or persons (98%) who have a child with a similar clinical situation (ie a similar diagnosis) seem to be other ways that parents of children with autism I choose them to find understanding and support. Even though there is no public organization in the Romanian native environment to offer (e) emergency support through social workers, this source of support should be mentioned among the others already mentioned.

***c. What helps support groups for parents of children with autism?***

The depressive and anxious parenting can be deployed to the parents of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder on the background of a „low level of social support”. Thus, support groups can prove their effectiveness in preventing or resolving “internal conflicts” experienced by the parent of a child diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder.

Research shows that “existential themes play an important role” in reporting people to life and their “reactions to particular situations”.

***d. Existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling groups addressed to the parents of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder***

Up to now there is very little research that has studied the applicability of existential and phenomenological therapy for specific problems; in particular, its effectiveness in support groups has not been tested. We want to continue to present our proposal on the structure of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling groups addressed to parents of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

We start our exposition by mentioning that the existential-phenomenological program proposed by this research project will include the following components: (a) individual expositions of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling, on the basis of which (following the content analysis) the themes to be dealt with in (b) will be created. of the existential-phenomenological group philosophical counseling sessions. In fact, in parallel, we will carry out (c) philosophical education sessions of basic existential-phenomenological origin or, in other words, lectures adapted to the intellectual, age and gender level of the participants / participants in the group, in which the main concepts of this existential and phenomenological approach are presented and discussed. Last but not least, parents will be able to participate in 10 workshops on existential and phenomenological themes.

The phenomenological analysis models that will guide discussions within the existential phenomenological support groups by “pre-filtering” the experiences / information collected in the individual therapy sessions are presented below.

Van Kamm’s model (1969) involves the following phases: (a) classification of data into categories; (b) reducing and linguistically transforming selected items into more precise descriptive terms; (c) removing or reducing claims that are not inherent to experience; (d) first identification and hypothetical description of the experience; (e) descriptions of descriptions in randomly selected protocols to verify the necessity and sufficiency of the statements; (f) valid identification and description of the experience.

The Colazzi (1978) model envisages (i) the extraction of sentences and sentences relevant to the experience; (ii) transforming the phrases into their own words, resulting in a list of significant meanings and assertions; (iii) grouping individual themes to make a further reduction of them; (iv) the compilation of a hypothetical exhaustive list; (v) “forward and backward” movement between the meaning of assertions and successive hypothetical lists until the themes are reflected in clusters; (vi) structural descriptions of the essence; (vii) return to subject description. Revision of their description, if necessary.

Moustakas (1990) proposes the heuristic method to analyze the phenomenological discourse. Thus, he suggests the following phases: immersion - centering all life on experience; incubation: withdrawal and expectation of “new meanings”; enlightenment - emerging themes and patterns, cluster formation; explain - adding other dimensions of significance; sanding emerging patterns; writing – the experience and portrayal of the individual in the study; creative synthesis – “bringing together” the pieces together, finding the relationships between them.

As regards the existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling groups addressed to the parents of children with physical and / or mental deficiencies, they will present some particularities: (a) the duration of each group will be 2 hours; (b) a number of 6-8 parents will attend the group / session meetings, given that the effectiveness of this format has already been established in the literature when it comes to the phenomenological approach; (c) the structure of the discussions will be guided by a phenomenological analysis model.

The themes we propose in the workshops where parents of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are invited to attend will have the following headings: (a) Identity and personal responsibility; (b) Anxiety and parental and social guilt; (c) Family Conflicts, Service Problems, and Their Relationship to Child Diagnosed With Autistic Spectrum Disorder; (d) Looking for meaning, meaning, and purpose; (e) Modes of existence of the world (my world, of myself and of others) and my place in them; (f) Existential sadness and loss potential; (g) The origin of the internal conflict; (h) The feeling of self; (g) The issue of sacrifice in the context of personal liberty.

These themes come to address, in an open and, at the same time, particular experience of group participants, common problems that arise in the parents of children with autism and which are mentioned in the literature.

## General Conclusions

This paper aimed at presenting the principles, methods and models of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling and conceiving a program by which the parents of children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder benefit from group counseling sessions using the existential-phenomenological approach.

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