

Coaching Today

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Coaching Today is the quarterly journal for counsellors and psychotherapists who are retraining and practising as coaches, as well as coaches from a diverse range of backgrounds.

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Coaching in practice

Existential analytic coaching

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Kate Hammer

is a senior coach and coaching supervisor who brings existential themes – acceptance, autonomy, belonging and meaning – into leadership and life coaching. The work of Viktor Frankl, and the teachings of Professor Alfred Längle, have transformed how Kate works with her clients today.

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What is the approach you use in coaching (the theoretical model, its premises/underlying beliefs or reasons for being developed etc)?

I ground my work in existential analysis, which offers a model for human thriving centred on inner consent and inner resonance. These phrases refer to the inner 'yes' we have each experienced in life, when our direction and our response to circumstances feel aligned and authentic. Without an inner 'yes', we can feel constrained by 'shoulds', divided within ourselves or alienated from our surroundings. We might treat ourselves as a tool, or perpetually criticise ourselves. The conditions for burnout arise when we continually lack an inner 'yes'. Living according to our values depends on sensing the inner

resonance, hearing and heeding this inner consent. For me, this gets to the heart of coaching as a process oriented towards sustainable personal change.

Existential analysis and logotherapy were conceived by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who perceived the importance of meaning for people's capacity to endure difficult situations, like those described in his concentration camp memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*.¹ My teacher Alfred Längle has devoted his working life to enriching Frankl's powerful insights. He now teaches a more complete description of human wellbeing.

The core premise of existential analysis is that we humans live through four dimensions of reality, each with a corresponding motivation. We find ourselves thrown into the world. Saying 'yes' to the world is the first fundamental motivation. For existentialists, the world is the wider world of places, situations, other people, traditions, norms that confront and shape us as individuals. We need sufficient space, protection and support to give our 'yes'. Endurance takes strength and focus, which may benefit other areas of our lives. Getting to a genuine 'yes' is freeing.

We are alive, and our likes and dislikes help us forge closeness and orient towards values. Saying 'yes' to life is the second fundamental motivation. Our 'yes' here is linked to our inner vitality, our capacity to feel our feelings. When we cannot access our feelings,

both our vitality and our ability to orient ourselves diminish.

It is I uniquely who am alive, and when I am allowed by my situation and the strength of my self-worth to embrace this, I say 'yes' to myself. This is the third fundamental motivation. The deep consideration existential analysis gives to self-worth formation provides coaches with so many pathways in to helping a client develop greater self-worth.

Finally, the future is always ahead, and the question, 'What can I contribute?' is always with me. This finally brings us to the question of

The core premise of existential analysis is that we humans live through four dimensions of reality, each with a corresponding motivation

meaning, and what life asks of us. My 'yes' in the fourth fundamental motivation is my contribution to the future. And if I give that 'yes' without the power and connection that comes from my other motivations, I may find my efforts unsustainable.

In existential analysis, we open towards the inner world and the outer world simultaneously, because we live at their intersection. The inner world is the site of our inner dialogue. Clients can practise tenderness and respect towards themselves, and unpick the limiting beliefs that impede acceptance and limit their ability to seize the slices of freedom afforded by their circumstances. Outwardly, a mismatch of capacities and circumstances can disorient and disturb people. Bringing these into alignment, while encouraging curiosity and tolerance of uncertainty, can enhance self-efficacy and bolster self-confidence.

Why were you drawn to this approach/model and how did you go about becoming skilled/qualified in it?

For over a decade, I worked internationally in the field of innovation and workplace creativity. Alongside a three-dimensional magazine I co-founded, called IdeaKeg, I developed an original framework to help teams articulate their 'why' in a granular, evidence-rich manner. But

With existential analysis as a framework, I no longer feel I'll be overwhelmed by the complexity of a client's circumstances or the depth of their lived experience

after a series of deaths in my family, I found I was weary of organisation timescales. Instead, I was drawn to individuals. To make this shift confidently, I needed an 'architecture' of human flourishing, in the same way creative problem solving had provided me with a flexible roadmap for collaborative creativity when I was an innovation consultant. Having a framework would give me solid ground from which to improvise and experiment.

I didn't know where to look, but I have always been drawn to themes of freedom and responsibility. Eventually, at a book launch of *The Wiley World Handbook of Existential Therapy*,² I met my teacher. The timing was ideal, as a London-based group was forming. The introductory weekend began the very next day.

In existential analysis, I've found a rich framework that helps me navigate whatever themes a client brings. With this compass, I notice I maintain composure when clients

expand the concerns they bring to our coaching conversation. I no longer feel nervous and wish a client would stay with narrower preoccupations. Some clients have fulfilled one intention and then pivoted our work to another area of life where they seek to grow. This gives us the chance to rehearse endings.

Our training helps us develop the phenomenological attitude of openness. Phenomenology is an attitude of openness to what is there and the impressions I receive, which underpins unconditional positive regard. We bracket theory and allow impressions to arise spontaneously in dialogue with a client. We practise self-experience in small learning sets that meet regularly. Each person describes what preoccupies them and responds to open-ended, exploratory questions on a given theme. Listening to others is a chance to notice the impressions forming in oneself. The process was, for me, transformative. The impact on my coaching presence was immediate and lasting. I listen now with my whole body, and have started introducing somatic coaching techniques to clients.

The basic course lasts two-and-a-half years and equips skilled coaches with the understanding of the themes and how they fit together. I'm currently in the final 18 months of study so that eventually I can also practise existential analysis and logotherapy as a qualified counsellor and psychotherapist. I'm part of Europe's first English-language cohort.

Do you work with a particular client group and how do your clients benefit from the fact that you take this particular approach to coaching?

I work with clients at all stages of adulthood on themes relating to personal life and also to work and leadership.

Some of my clients are professional writers. They relish dialogue, the way I improvise and use metaphor. Other clients are pursuing lonely, risky missions related to climate response or social justice, and appreciate the balance and ease that new self-understandings can bring. Many of my clients have experienced migration, and the existential analytic process can foster an inner homecoming. Feeling that one belongs with oneself can bring such immense relief.

What do you most love about being this kind of coach? Have you experienced this kind of coaching in your life and how does it resource you as a practitioner?

With existential analysis as a framework, I no longer feel I'll be overwhelmed by the complexity of a client's circumstances or the depth of their

lived experience. Suffering no longer frightens me, and the new ease has broadened my shoulders and helped me really settle into my coaching chair. Furthermore, phenomenology has taught me humility and given me access to myself in unprecedented ways.

Could you share a tool, framework or aspect of this approach that other coaches might be able to use or draw on now in their work with clients?

One of my personal favourites is to make a list of your likes. List with spontaneity and without self-censure. Next, make a list of all the synonyms you can think of relating to liking. Then make a list of your dislikes, and follow by listing synonyms for disliking. Now step back and notice: what do you make of your lists? Is one longer than the other? Which one? And how did it feel as you made your lists?

I'm such a positive, reassuring person. So I was surprised how enlivening I found it to list my dislikes and listen to peers describing theirs. It was such a lesson in differentiation, and I laughed loud and long at my surprise.

Access to inner resonance means having access to feelings. So learning that having a like or dislike is different from acting upon it gave me permission to feel all my feelings. This was a new experience for me. The emotional freedom I found gets to the heart of the phrase attributed to Frankl: 'Between the stimulus and the response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'

If people are interested in finding out more, what can they read or where could they explore it through CPD or fully train in it?

Alfried Längle's videos offer a beautiful entry point to learn more about existential analysis. See The Viennese School of Existential Analysis, YouTube channel. [Online.] www.youtube.com/channel/UCXAPATrjxOzLeMw4rPYc-KA The Viennese School of Existential Analysis and Logotherapy has a page on Viktor Frankl, including video lectures and a list of his books. See www.gle-uk.com/viktor-frankl

For more information, see <https://gle-uk.com> for details on training in the UK. ■

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1 Frankl VE. Man's search for meaning. London: Penguin; 2004 (original publication 1946).

2 van Deurzen E et al. The Wiley world handbook of existential therapy. London: Wiley-Blackwell; 2019.