

10 COPING STRATEGIES

When Going Through
An Existential Crisis

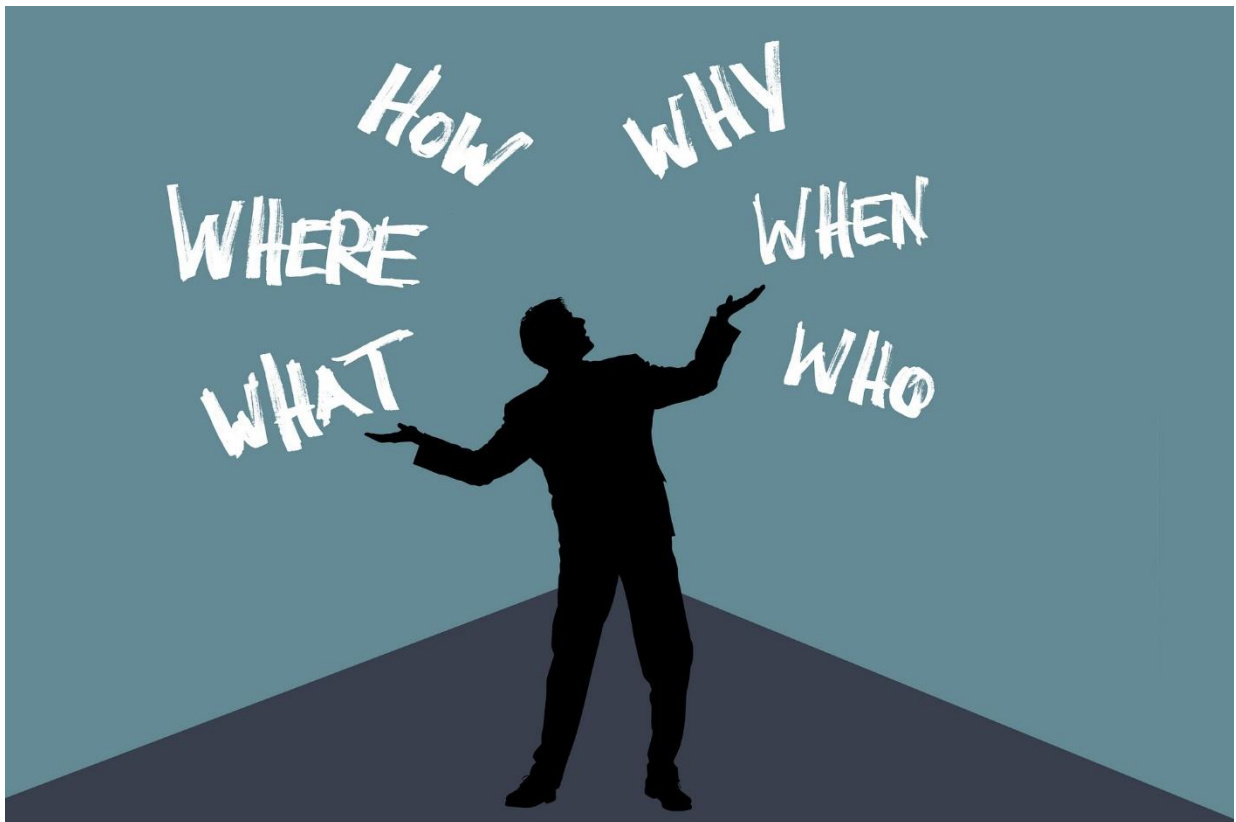
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Introduction

When going through an existential crisis you can feel many things- sadness, anxiety, helplessness, and hopelessness among many other emotions and feelings. While complex and complicated, an existential crisis does not have to be the end of you.

You can navigate an existential crisis and come out well on the other side of it as long as you have been provided some tools and resources to effectively manage and cope.



What Is An Existential Crisis

An existential crisis can be defined as a period of re-examining the meaning, purpose, and value of our lives. Often during these times people begin to feel uneasiness about meaning, choice, and freedom in life. Ultimately, the concern is that life has become pointless and that existence has lost meaning due to various limits and/or boundaries placed on it.

A person of any age can be impacted by an existential crisis, but some people diagnosed with certain health conditions may be more susceptible to experiencing an existential crisis. Evidence has shown a correlation between experiencing an existential crisis and having anxiety, borderline personality disorders, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorders (Cuncic, 2020).



Also, many people tend to experience existential crises when they are presented with a challenging situation or find themselves struggling to succeed in the midst of a situation.

Major trauma, major loss, or major life events can often be a trigger in these instances. Such events can include (Higuera, 2018):

- Loss of a loved one
- Career change
- Feelings of guilt
- Diagnosis of a serious illness
- Pent up emotions
- Having children
- Displeasure with self
- Marriage or divorce
- Lack of social fulfillment
- Entering major age categories 40s, 50s, 60s

In his book *Existential Psychotherapy*, existential psychiatrist and Stanford University professor Dr. Irvin Yalom summarized the causes of an existential crisis into four primary reasons- death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. With regards to death it's the fear of death and the lack of ability to control it which causes anxiety and stress.

Freedom can also create a stress and crisis in that we must be fully responsible for our actions and decisions when we are given ultimate freedom to act, think, and speak as we please. There can also be the realization that we can never fully know or understand someone which can lead to feelings of being alone and a desire or need to isolate from others.

Finally, can come a series of disappointments which can create a sense of meaninglessness where people feel as though they have no purpose or belonging and therefore cannot see a path forward (Marinoff, 2020).

Symptoms Of An Existential Crisis

During a period of existential crisis our mental, emotional, and physical health can be significantly impacted.

The following outlines a series of symptoms and signs that can signal one is experiencing an existential crisis (Marinoff, 2020).

- An obsession with the meaning of life and death
- Suicidal ideations
- Hopelessness and a belief that change in anything is impossible and futile
- Intense feelings of anxiety, distress, and sadness about the state of the world and society
- Feeling and becoming increasingly more disconnected, separated, and isolated from others
- Lack of motivation and low energy levels
- Lack of interest in activities previously enjoyed

There are also disorders associated with existential crises. First is existential crisis depression. This may consist of experiencing fatigue, headaches, persistent sadness, lashing out at others, thoughts of self-harm, increase or decrease in eating, and feelings of hopelessness and purposelessness.

Another disorder is existential crisis anxiety. This can be characterized by an uptick in stress, fear, panic, discomfort, and a preoccupation with existential topics like life and death, purpose, meaning, and relationships.

Additionally, one can suffer from existential obsessive compulsive disorder. This can be defined by obsessive thoughts which feed compulsions about the meaning of life. An example might be needing to repeatedly ask questions or obsessively researching certain life topics in an attempt to find answers and meaning (Higuera, 2018).

Existential Ideas And Questions

Often during periods of existential crisis there are major questions people wrestle with. When someone is dealing with an existential crisis the issue arises because there is an inability to find satisfying answers to those questions.

It is the lack of answers that triggers internal conflict which causes frustration and robs people of inner joy (Marinoff, 2020).



Crisis of Emotion, Experiences, and Embodiment

Failure to allow yourself to feel negative emotions can lead to an existential crisis by creating a false sense of happiness. Realizing that there is a lack of true happiness can lead to a feeling of emptiness

Crisis of Meaning and Meaninglessness

Reflections on life can lead to the feeling that one has failed to accomplish anything of great significance or meaning This can cause someone to question their existence and contribution to society.

Crisis of Death and Mortality

Reaching an age milestone (i.e. turning 50) or being diagnosed with a serious illness can cause you to reflect about the meaning of life and death and question the foundation of life.

Crisis of Isolation and Connectedness

Periods of extended loneliness or the loss of loved ones can lead to isolation which can cause some people to believe that life is pointless and lacks meaning.

Crisis of Freedom and Responsibility

This is the idea that you have the freedom to make your own choices but also the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of those choices, whether negative or positive. The weight of this responsibility can prove to be too much at times and trigger immense existential anxiety.

10 Coping Strategies When Going Through An Existential Crisis

When going through an existential crisis there are measures you can take to help yourself come out of the crisis and thrive.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining focus on a particular sensation (i.e. breathing, mantras, etc.) for a prolonged period of time. Mindfulness is particularly valuable when facing an existential crisis because it can be used to recenter us and redirect our attention to the present moment.

When in an existential crisis a lot of time is spent thinking about the past or the future. One can easily get lost in a vortex of thoughts that takes us down a path of desperation and hopelessness. However, mindfulness helps us halt that progression of thoughts and focus our energy on the here and now.

By doing so we are able to see the good in the present which can bring us out of a crisis altogether (Cleveland Clinic, 2020). A great and practical method to implement mindfulness is via the practice of meditation.

Meditation in the amount of just 5-15 minutes a day can help calm restless thoughts and develop a centeredness and focus on the present that relieves an existential crisis.

Alter Your Perspective

Our viewpoint plays a significant role in an existential crisis. What we choose to focus on will shape our perspective and lead us closer to or further away from an existential crisis. Instead of pursuing thoughts that take us down a path of hopelessness or meaninglessness we should intentionally pursue those thoughts that focus on the good and the positives.



Rather than considering past failures and lack of accomplishments, efforts should be made to focus on past successes and wins. Rather than focusing on imminent death, focus should be placed on the joys and pleasures of life.

Rather than focusing on how we never truly know anyone, we should aim to focus on the benefits we gain from the relationships we have in our lives. When we make conscious efforts to shift from the negative thoughts that drag us down to the positive thoughts that elevate us, we can have a more hopeful outlook in life (Cleveland Clinic, 2020).

Find Meaning

Much time spent stuck in an existential crisis is spent trying to find the meaning “of” something. However, it may be far more productive to find the meaning “in” it instead. For example, instead of looking for the meaning of life it is better to find meaning in life.

This is a practice of shifting focus and attention away from one that can cause mental strain and disdain, to one that can bring joy and gratitude. Finding the meaning in something takes the complexity out of the process and simplifies it, making it easier for us to attach to and removing the source of the existential trigger (Shayne, 2020).



Gratitude Journal

When in the midst of an existential crisis there is often a struggle to identify meaning in life. A gratitude journal can help significantly in establishing or reestablishing that sense of meaning. Gratitude helps us to see those things we can presently appreciate and that are presently adding value to our lives.

Some of those things can include relationships, jobs, achievements, or even life which works against many of the facets of existential crises. Thus, gratitude journals can be used to ground our thoughts, refocus us on the present, and calm our fears and anxieties (Cleveland Clinic, 2020).

Maintain Meaningful Relationships

A major existential crisis can occur when there is a feeling of loneliness and isolation. Thus, being intentional about pursuing and maintaining meaningful relationships is of great value. Being in a meaningful relationship with others can help to curb the thoughts that make us feel as though we cannot really know or trust others.

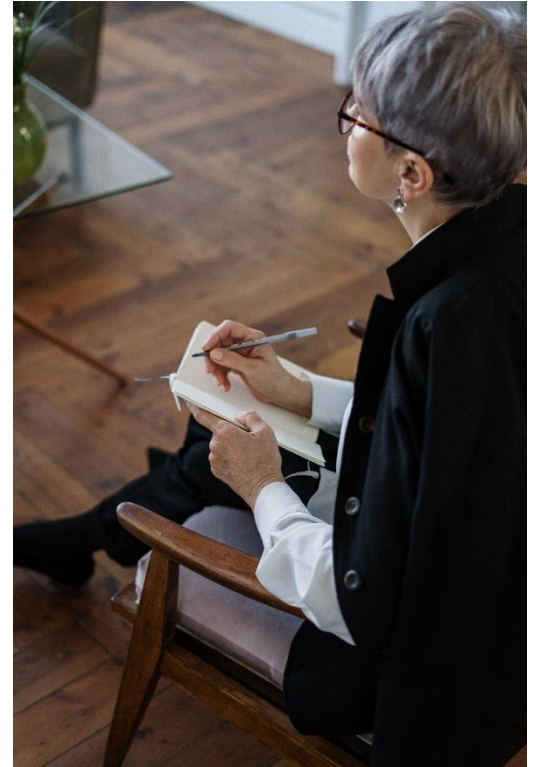
When we do have relationships with family members, friends, and even colleagues that demonstrate there are people we can know well (and who can know us deeply) and who we can trust (and who trust us) it breaks down the negative thoughts related to the meaninglessness of relationships and helps us overcome them.

Treatment

While there is not a specific treatment for existential crises specifically, there are situations where the symptoms of an existential crisis require consultation of a medical professional.

Doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, or even therapists can help you to cope with the crisis by prescribing medication to address severed symptoms like anxiety or depression, or can implement therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy that can address the thought patterns leading to the crisis (Higuera, 2018).

Psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy, can also be relied on as a treatment option to address symptoms of an existential crisis such as anxiety and depression (Paler, 2018). If the symptoms of an existential crisis persist long-term or the symptoms become severe such as having suicidal thoughts then treatment should be immediately pursued.



Embrace Uncertainty

Major events and trauma can trigger lots of uncertainty about life which can bring about an existential crisis. When one spends their energy trying to fight the uncertainty or get to the bottom of the uncertainty it can lead to great confusion, hopelessness, and other elements of existential symptoms.

Learning to embrace the uncertainty and unknowns builds resilience and helps us learn to adapt to the changes and cope with life. The burden of constantly thinking about what might be or what could become is lifted and we experience freedom to simply live and exist (Paler, 2018).

Maintain Hope

Hopelessness is a staple of an existential crisis, so being intentional about maintaining hope is key to combating it. In order to go about this process, one should look at life and find things that are worth looking forward to.

These things can be simple like looking forward to seeing a friend or looking forward to seeing a movie. Or they can be bigger milestones like looking forward to a graduation or a job promotion.

Finding those things in your life and immediate environment that you can attach to will help you to stay focused on the positives and not get caught up in the negatives that can drain you and lead you towards hopelessness (Griffin, 2016).

Value Yourself

Another staple of an existential crisis is the tendency to undervalue self and question one's significance, contribution, or worth in society or life as a whole. Taking the time to find and highlight those things about yourself that are valuable as well as those contributions you've made that are valuable can help to combat the notion that you lack a place.

When you can see how you contribute to your family, friends, job, community, or other places and add value then you are more likely to believe that you have worth and a place worth maintaining in the world (Griffin, 2016).

Let It Go

Ultimately, there is a host of things we will not be able to solve, understand, or get to the bottom of and that is completely okay. Instead of getting lost in what we cannot ultimately understand at times it is best for us to resolve to make peace with not knowing and not understanding.

It's where the statement, "What you don't know can't hurt you," comes in and may be true. Freeing ourselves from needing to know can allow us to just live and let live, releasing us of the burden of figuring it all out (Griffin, 2016).

Conclusion

An existential crisis is not the end of the world, nor is it the end of your life. You can overcome it with the implementation of thoughtful and intentional measures.

By working through a series (if not all) of the outlined tips above you can learn to deal with the symptoms as well as address the fundamental roots of an existential crisis to prevent it from gaining a real hold over your life.

In doing so we can prevent major events and traumas from triggering us and sending us into a spiral, and instead learn to adapt and thrive in life.

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