

25 Proposed Qualities, Attitudes, and Skills of an Existential Humanistic Psychotherapist

- Bob Edelstein

I have been a member of AHP since 1973 and an Existential Humanistic therapist since 1975. Over the years, I've been continuously fascinated by both how and why Existential Humanistic Psychotherapy works. Part of my search has included attempting to define the qualities, attitudes, and skills that are specifically beneficial for an Existential Humanistic psychotherapist to develop. Below are my thoughts.

1. Hearing and observing the lived experience of the client with acceptance and engaged curiosity.
2. Being congruent with your authentic self and, as appropriate, expressing that.
3. Having an unconditional positive regard for the client that is expressed verbally and embodied non-verbally.
4. Having a highly developed sense of empathy that you express to the client. This means being able to sensitively communicate your perception of the client's lived experience to them in a way that they feel deeply heard and understood. This facilitates the client to make new discoveries that can range from helpful to life-transforming.
5. Valuing clients for their inherent worth and dignity beyond their undesirable and/or ineffective behaviors.
6. Believing even the most wounded client has the capacity and potential to heal.
7. Believing each client is capable of self-actualization.
8. Believing self-actualization is not only good for the client, it is good for the world.
9. Believing a client's lived experience supersedes any theory about how that client should live.
10. Facilitating the client's search for meaning. This includes exploring the client's definition of themselves and their world through their verbal messages and nonverbal cues. Their self and world identity may need to be challenged so that possibly a more rewarding identity can be embraced, if the client so chooses.
11. Having the flexibility, presence and spontaneity to work with each client so that each client has a unique therapeutic course.
12. Being aware of and honest about your strengths and vulnerabilities as a therapist, and as a person. This includes knowing your limits.
13. Being fully engaged in the present moment. Recognizing when vital elements of the client's past and future are contained in the present moment. Exploring what emerges from the present moment can facilitate change that ranges from subtle to dramatic.
14. Trusting that the awarenesses which emerge in the present moment, both within the client, within the therapist, and between us, will lead to the exact intervention that will best move the process forward.
15. Believing clients know themselves better than the therapist can ever know them. The therapist's task is not to give answers to the client, but to provide the container for the client to discover their own answers.

16. Being comfortable with not knowing. Having the ability to remain present and be patient with the process until the mystery of not knowing transforms into increased clarity.
17. Being patient with silence until the therapist or client has something relevant to say, thus drawing the client deeper into their immediate experience.
18. Being authentic within the context of the client-therapist relationship. This facilitates the client to trust their own authenticity. As a result, the client can more easily access and express the full range of their feelings. The client experiences the value of being authentic.
19. Using the client-therapist relationship as a powerful way for the client's intimacy issues and existential themes to be explored directly in the therapy session. Shifts occur by exploring the authentic client-therapist relationship as well as any transference and/or counter-transference that may be occurring.
20. Valuing the mutuality of the client-therapist relationship, especially the importance of mutual respect and caring in order for the relationship to develop optimally. Appreciating the reciprocity of needs being met, while recognizing that those needs are different.
21. Fostering the development of an I-Thou relationship with the client and acknowledging its sacredness. Addressing what might be preventing the I-Thou relationship from developing.
22. Having confidence in your ability and capacity to hold the container for your clients as they work through their changing feelings, needs, and issues.
23. Accepting and engaging fully with whatever feelings our clients are dealing with – even when it is personally uncomfortable for us as therapists.
24. Accepting and engaging fully with whatever feelings we as therapists have towards our clients, and working through them appropriately - whether that be internally, in supervision/consultation, in our own therapy, and/or directly with the client.
25. Embracing your unique therapeutic style as valid and sufficient.

BIO:

Bob Edelstein, LMFT, MFT, is an Existential Humanistic psychotherapist based in Portland, Oregon. In addition to maintaining a private practice for more than 30 years, he also provides consultation, supervision, and training for professionals, and leads a one-day group entitled Authentic Engagement: A Radical Way of Being in the World. Bob is a founding member of the Association for Humanistic Psychology - Oregon Community and a member of the board of the Existential Humanistic Institute based in San Francisco.