

# Guest Editorial



**Dr Claire Arnold-Baker\*** and **Dr Neil Lamont\*\***

We live in turbulent times. We face crises on many levels. Our physical environment is being threatened by climate change. Political and religious unrest has rocked nations and led to the mass migration of desperate peoples. Nationalism is on the rise and we witness the most vulnerable being scapegoated and persecuted. The incredible and welcome advances with technology have also left many of us feeling evermore isolated and disconnected from others. These global realities for many constitute forms of existential crisis because in different but equally significant ways, they fundamentally threaten our very being. Our sense of identity and belonging is being profoundly challenged on many levels, and this is contributing to the pronounced levels of anxiety and poor mental health we see in society today.

In such an existential crisis, one's beliefs and values fall into doubt; we feel unskilled and worthless, adrift and unable to deal with life's challenges. Everything that was familiar and made sense now feels strange and confusing and there is no longer any certainty in life. Existential therapy, with its focus on understanding human predicaments, in all their complexity, helps people address these crises by encouraging them to engage with, and make sense of, the fundamental elements of their existence, so restoring meaning and purpose to their life.

Examining life in a holistic way, enables the challenges faced by our clients to be placed in a personal as well as a relational context. This will not just be about the private world of the client, their family background, relationships and work; rather it extends outwards to the societal and cultural context that they are in, their physical environment and the spiritual arena of their values and beliefs. Each aspect cannot be examined in isolation, as there will inevitably be an interaction between all these elements. To understand the client's struggles will mean gaining an understanding of the client's whole world.

The articles in this issue aim to elucidate some of the struggles people experience in the UK and the world today and will demonstrate how existential therapy is particularly well-suited in helping people make sense of and, crucially, find meaning in the problems they face.

Motherhood is one such scenario where new mothers face an existential crisis as their world and their life transforms. Coupled with the societal discourse around motherhood this creates an area of struggle. Claire Arnold-Baker's article explores the paradox between the public perceptions of motherhood with the private experiences of women. She demonstrates how existential philosophy and therapy can help women navigate the turbulent transition to motherhood and to find their voice and their own way of being a mother through gaining a new understanding of these challenges.

Our lives are bounded by time. When we stop to consider this, when we are confronted with the prospect of our own finitude, our focus can readily move to how we are living now and this in turn offers a rich opportunity for retuning life to be better aligned to our values and aspirations. This is at the core of Existential Time-Limited Therapy. Neil Lamont reports on research with a group of gay men who were experiencing profound relational unease, and feelings of rejection, isolation and depression. He shows how the existential time-limited therapy effectively attended to their quest for self-acceptance and learning to live in a vital way.

How we create meaning from traumatic experiences is a central tenet of existential therapy. However, this is, of course, just as relevant to practitioners as it is to clients. With an over-stretched NHS, mental health practitioners are faced with increasingly challenging workloads, and often with little or no support. Simon Wharne's article explores the experience of resilience for mental health care professionals who have worked with suicidal clients.

He investigates the underpinnings of resilience from an existential perspective and shows how this understanding can help support both practitioners and clients more effectively.

Whilst freedom is assumed by most of us to be one of the cornerstones of our lives and that of society, this is of course far from true for everyone. Indeed, still now there are countries that endure totalitarianism and where we witness the oppression of peoples. Oana Barnett explores the concept of freedom for dissenting citizens imprisoned in Romanian Gulags. Through talking to ex-prisoners about their harrowing experiences, Oana has elucidated the fundamental aspects of freedom which are in fact relevant to all of us

Drawing upon existential-phenomenological ideas, Jamil Ahmed examines one of the most severe and disturbing mental health conditions, schizophrenia. By utilising a lifeworld analysis, Jamil invites us to consider this through the prism of self, body, space, time and others, which can allow us to contemplate and understand this with fresh eyes, away from the highly medicalised mainstream treatment approach that is typical in Western societies today.

As people have become more globally mobile, either through choice or necessity, we see the ever-growing phenomenon of migration around the world. In her article, Nancy Hakim Dowek explores the concept of migrants being 'bi-rooted'; that is having roots in both their home country and their adopted country and what that means to a person and their sense of belonging. Nancy's research shows the importance of the connection that is made to the place that's called home and for migrants these connections are made to two different countries and will determine the person's sense of belonging in both.

Identity and belonging are also the focus of a very topical article from Jacqueline Sewell, based upon her research into the experiences of the black diaspora of Caribbean Jamaican heritage in the UK, and specifically daughters of the Windrush Generation. Drawing upon existential ideas, Jacqueline explores how black identity emerged and developed in this particular social and historical context. She looks at how the mixture of both cultures interplay in their sense of self and home. This is especially timely research given the recent Windrush

Scandal when so many of our fellow citizens faced deportation from their home to a country where they often had no ties.

This special issue focuses on the unique contribution existential therapy can make to understanding the challenges that we are facing today. Existential philosophy enables us to look at human experience in its uniqueness but also in what we share. The focus on understanding life's difficulties and finding the courage to face our limitations and reveal our potential, means that clients are enabled to find new ways to think about and live their lives with more meaning and purpose. In these turbulent times, it is important, perhaps now more than ever, to be able to make sense of and find meaning in our lives and to uncover the inner courage to confront and overcome our challenges. Existential therapy has this at the heart of the approach.

We are greatly appreciative of our fellow contributors in helping demonstrate the reach of the existential approach and highlighting the areas in which current existential research is being undertaken. We hope you enjoy this special Existential issue. 🍷

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Claire and Neil, Guest Editors

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