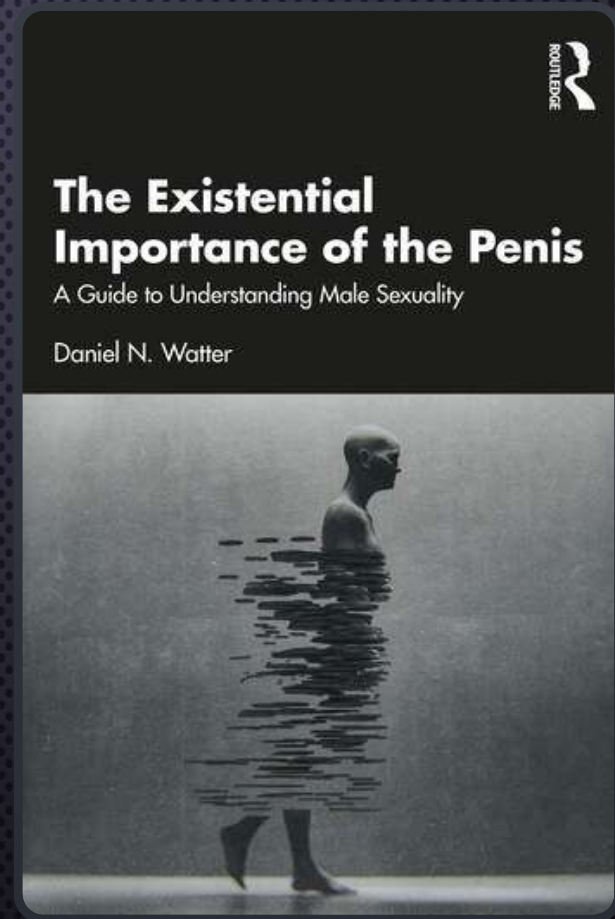


Understanding and Treating the Sexual Problems of Men: An Existential Approach

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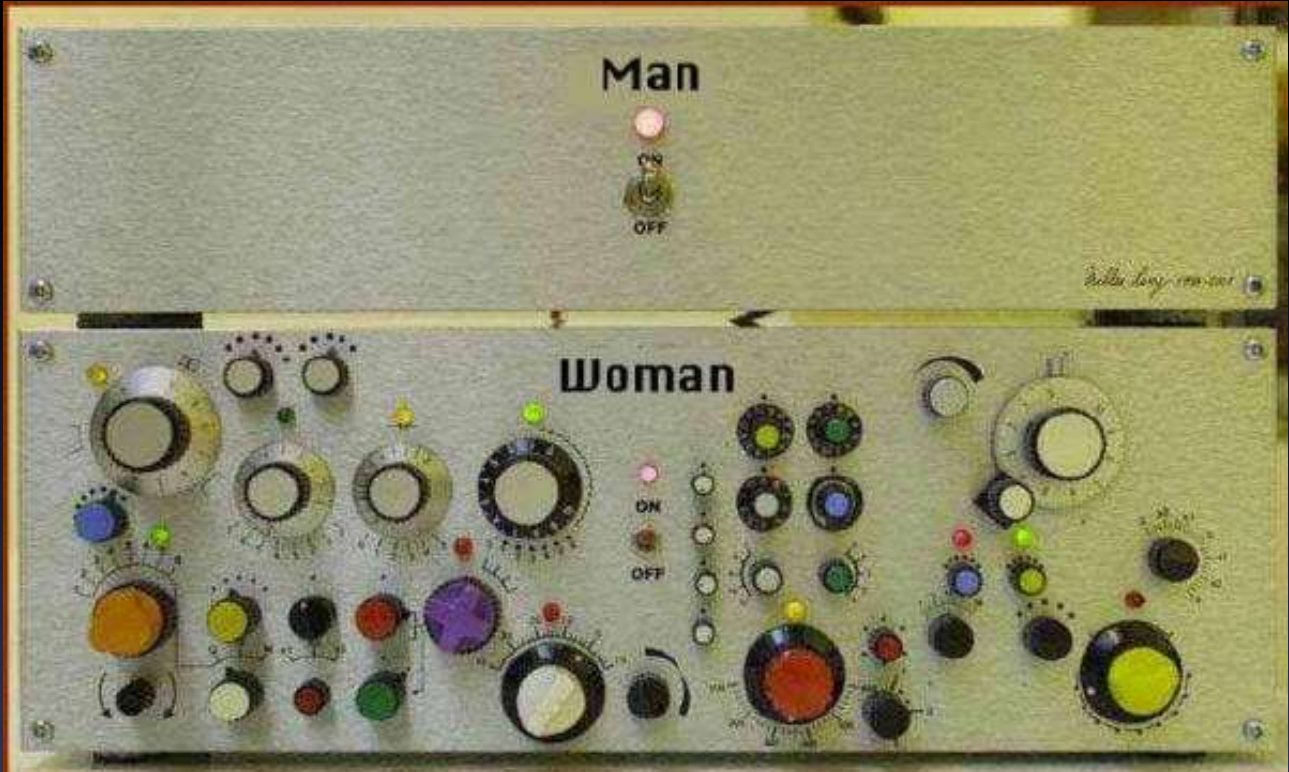
Acknowledgement

- I am deeply indebted to Irvin Yalom, M.D. for his work regarding Existential Psychotherapy.



Highlighted points

- Performance anxiety, as an etiological factor in male sexual dysfunction is over-emphasized.
- Early childhood trauma, particularly non-sexual trauma, is an important factor in male sexual dysfunction.
- The penis is the primary conduit of male emotional distress.
- The emotional lives of men are too often overlooked and/or misunderstood.



Men and sex

- Many who have written about male sexuality in the past have largely focused on the disappointment these men feel because they are unable to have sex. Certainly, that is a significant aspect to their suffering. However, to assume that the inability to have sex only for the sake of *sexual* pleasure, not to mention to undergo the invasive, uncomfortable, and often frustrating medical interventions, would likely miss the deeper significance of reduced penile functioning.

➤ Existential Psychology

- Every person is centered in self and lives life through the meaning he or she places on that center.
- Every person is responsible for mobilizing the courage to protect the self, to affirm it, and to enhance its continued existence.
- People need other people with whom they can empathize and from whom they can learn.

Existential Psychotherapy: A Relational Construct

- Individuality as secondary to relationships.
- Relationships are elemental and inevitable, as we can never be fully separate from others.
- Relationships and the way we live them are defining of who we are and what we become.
- The theme of responsibility and reflection on our personal way of relating to others becomes a fundamental aspect of existential relationship work.

Existential Couples Therapy

- “The best thing we can do for our relationships with others...is to render our relationship to ourselves more conscious. This is not a narcissistic activity. In fact, it will prove to be the most loving thing we can do for the Other. The greatest gift to others is our own best selves. Thus, paradoxically, if we are to serve relationship we, we are obliged to affirm our individual journey.” *James Hollis, The Eden Project*

Meg-John Barker

- "...existential psychotherapy follows the anti-psychiatry approach of Laing and Szasz in suggesting that diagnosis and treatment on the basis of symptoms misses the meaning of these symptoms and behaviours and thus dehumanize the individual. Spinelli argues that symptoms are expressions of attempts to defend against existential anxieties, so medical interventions and behavioural treatments can only offer a temporary amelioration."

The Changing Face of Sex Therapy

- Masters and Johnson's work.
- Protocols for symptom-specific relief.

➤ Psychiatry Rehumanized

- “For too long a time—for half a century, in fact—psychiatry tried to interpret the human mind merely as a mechanism, and consequently the therapy of mental disease merely in terms of a technique. I believe this dream has been dreamt out. What now begins to loom on the horizon are not the sketches of a psychologized medicine, but rather those of a humanized psychiatry.

➤ Psychiatry Rehumanized (cont.)

- A doctor, however, who would still interpret his own role mainly as that of a technician would confess that he sees in his patient nothing more than a machine, instead of seeing the human being behind the disease!
- V. Frankl, 1946

The more a man tries to demonstrate his sexual potency, or a woman her ability to experience orgasm, the less they are able to succeed. Pleasure is, and must remain, a side-effect, or by-product, and is destroyed and spoiled to the degree to which it is made a goal in itself.

V. Frankl, 1946

Yalom's Existential Dilemmas

- Freedom (Rollo May adds responsibility)
- Meaning
- Isolation
- Death (mortality)

Existential Sex Therapy

- *Through thinking of sexuality in such a way that sex is maintained but sexuality broadened beyond sex alone we can see the potential in counseling and psychotherapy for sexuality to alert us to important aspects of our lives and the meaning they have for us. For example, we may find in sex therapy that sexual difficulties related to much broader aspects of a person's life. For example, someone who has trouble reaching orgasm may struggle to let go and be vulnerable in relationships more generally. (Barker & Langdridge)*

Existential Sex Therapy (2)

One key way in which existential sex therapy would differ from more mainstream approaches would be in its openness to a multiplicity of possible meaning of sexual experiences and practices. Conventional approaches tend to assume universal causes for sexual problems, and focus on addressing these causes. For example, it is commonly assumed that erectile dysfunction results from the possessor of the penis failing to "perform" on one occasion and then becoming anxious in subsequent sexual encounters (Barker & Langdridge)

Existential Sex Therapy (3)

- It is important to explore the meanings of erectile loss, penetration/engulfment for patients with vaginismus (Kleinplatz), or of orgasm, and its lack, for those who struggle to achieve orgasm (Barker).

Performance anxiety?

Sexual Dysfunction as Trauma

- *Without realizing that the past is constantly determining their present actions, they avoid learning anything about their history. They continue to live in their repressed childhood situation, ignoring the fact that it no longer exists. They are continuing to fear and avoid dangers that, although once real, have not been real for a long time. They are driven by unconscious memories and by repressed feelings and needs that determine nearly everything they do or fail to do. (Alice Miller)*

Trauma

- Sexual
- Non-sexual
- The protective unconscious
- The Body Keeps the Score (van der kolk)
- Threats to one's existence

Staring at the Sun

- The pain is there; when you close one door on it, it knocks to come in somewhere else. *Irvin Yalom*

Assessment is All About the Story and The Meaning Within the Narrative

- Tests, questionnaires, inventories are of little value. The importance and usefulness of the clinical narrative cannot be underestimated.
- Understanding the dynamics of family of origin is often essential in humanistic-existential sex therapy.

The Penis Speaks

- The relationship deepening event
- The case of james
- The case of edward

Dx (Contextual) questions

- Situational (solo v. partnered, casual v. committed)
- Progression (i.e. when does erectile loss occur?)
- Timeline (why now?)

Men Behaving Badly

James Cantor, et al (2013)

- *Despite that the literature emphasizes that cases of hypersexuality are highly diverse with regard to clinical presentation and comorbid features, the major models for understanding and treating hypersexuality employ a “one size fits all” approach. That is, rather than identify which problematic behaviors might respond best to which interventions, existing approaches presume or assert without evidence that all cases of hypersexuality (however termed or defined) represent the same underlying problem and merit the same approach to intervention.*

The Power of Death-Anxiety As A Catalyst For Change

Yalom suggests, *Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us.*"

Charles Dickens', "A Christmas Carol."

Indeed, these cases give us an opportunity to "save people" from the oftentimes devastating effects of their sexual behaviors.

Mickey Mantle

- “If I knew I was going to live this long, I’d have taken better care of myself.”
- Mantle’s father died at 39. Mickey often was quoted as saying he doubted he would live past 40.

Older Than My Old Man Now

- *From the liner notes:*
- “If I remain still, if I am alone and silent long enough to hear the sound of my own blood or breathing or digestion above the rustling of leaves or the whir of the refrigerator, my father is likely to turn up. He just arrives unbidden in the long running film of my thoughts, like Hitchcock in his pictures, and he looks for all those 40-plus years of disembodiment much like himself, big and sandy haired with freckles on the backs of his hands, perhaps a bit more diffident in the way he holds himself than I remember.

Liner Notes Continued

- He doesn't stay long, and as far as I can tell his visits have no message. Yet—even though years of therapy have led me to make the dark whistling claim that he's finally dead and gone—my father, who died when I was 17, continues to be my principal ghost, a lifelong eminence grise, and only my own end will finish it."

Loudon Wainwright III

- Older Than My Old Man Now
- I wasn't sure this day would come
- I'd been living underneath his thumb
- But I don't feel so free—I don't even feel like me
- Now that there's no race left to run.
- Older than my old man now—
- I guess that means I kicked his ass.
- But just 'cause you survive
- That don't mean you feel alive
- And your demise will come to pass.

Yalom's "Death-Anxiety"

- Yalom (1980) describes sex as "death defeating" for some people because death is connected with banality and ordinariness, whereas sex promises to be exciting and magical. He notes that there is often an increase in the sexual activity of people diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses and that, for these people, their behavior is a "repression of death-anxiety."

Gurit Birnbaum

- “The awareness that death is inescapable, coupled with the instinctive desire to live, can constitute an unbearable paradox. To escape this potentially paralyzing terror and to maintain psychological equanimity, some people may employ certain defense mechanisms, which are designed to remove the awareness of death from conscious thoughts by imbuing the world with meaning, order, and permanence. Often people will reach for symbols of immortality. And sex can be a big one.”

Death Anxiety and Sexual Risk-Taking

- Ford, et al. found that when viewed in the context of defensive behavior, an *increase* in willingness to engage in risky sexual behavior as a result of raising the issue of personal mortality would be conceptualized as a denial-based defensive reaction, designed to ward off conscious anxiety aroused by the issue of death.

Sex and Death

Stephanie Waxman

- “During the week that Big Tessa faced the decision to undergo a risky bone marrow transplant to thwart the greater evil, an aggressive cancer, we took a walk in the desert on the outskirts of Palm Springs. It was early April and scarlet blooms were already popping open on the paddle cactus and the air was filled with the scent of sage. After walking in silence for a while, she stopped, and in her usual frank way, asked my advice: In the face of cancer and the transplant—and in either case and in all probability, in the face of death—what action could she take to affirm life?”

Waxman (cont.)

The answer came to me in a thunderbolt of absolute certainty and I offered it without hesitation and with great conviction: "Have lots of sex."

It was no doubt naïve of me to think it possible to feel sexual when facing such a battle and such choices. But at the moment it seemed logical that the basic act of procreation was the best antidote to destructive forces."

Night

- “Freed of normal constraints, some of the young let go of their inhibitions and, under cover of darkness, caressed one another, without any thought of others, alone in the world. The others pretended not to notice.”
- Elie Wiesel, 1958

Ernest Hemingway

- *All men fear death. It's a natural fear that consumes us all. We fear death because we feel that we haven't loved well enough or loved at all, which ultimately are one and the same. However, when you make love with a truly great woman, one that deserves the utmost respect in this world and one that makes you feel truly powerful, that fear of death completely disappears...Death no longer lingers in the mind...But remember this, for that moment when you are making love with a woman of true greatness you will feel immortal.*

Moonstruck (1987)

- Olympia Dukakis: “Why would a man need more than one woman?”
- Danny Aiello: “I don’ t know. Maybe because he fears death?”
- Olympia Dukakis: “That’s it. That’s the reason!”

Yalom and Hypersexuality

- “Sex, the vital life force, often counters thoughts of death. I’ve encountered many instances of this mechanism: the patient with a severe coronary who was so sexually driven that in an ambulance carrying him to the emergency room, he attempted to grope an ambulance attendant; or the widow who felt so overcome with sexual feelings while driving to her husband’s funeral, or the elderly widower, terrified by death, who became uncharacteristically sexually driven and had

Yalom and Hypersexuality (2)

so many sexual affairs with women in his retirement community and created such divisiveness that the management demanded he seek psychiatric consultation.”

Patricia McElveen-Hoehn

- *The sexually conservative woman who returns home for the funeral of a parent or some close relative and takes with her a diaphragm and uncharacteristically engages in a sexual relationship with a stranger or casual friend; or the man who has a severe coronary and on the way to the hospital fondles his wife's breasts and presses for some sexual exchange; or the man who, with a child dying of leukemia, becomes highly promiscuous.*

Some Case Examples

- All self-identified as “sex addicts.”
- All identified their uncontrolled sexual behavior as having begun after a death-anxiety triggering event.
- Look for themes of “running out of time,” fears of closing doors (i.e. finality).
- Look for sense that “I will die young myself.”
- Rarely is the fear of death itself, or the dying process.

Tim

- *Tim was a 30 year old male patient whose wife was dying of leukemia. Tim began therapy not because of overt grief but because of an alarming degree of sexual preoccupation and compulsivity. He had led a monogamous life prior to his wife's illness; but as she approached death, he began compulsively to visit pornography films and singles' bars (running great risks of public exposure) and masturbated several times a day, often while in bed with his dying wife. On the night of his wife's funeral he sought out a prostitute. (Yalom, 1980)*

Simon

- Reports a stable, conventional life.
- Happily married for 20+ years.
- Hx. of satisfying sex life with wife.
- Entered therapy due to upset regarding loss of erectile functioning following radical prostatectomy one year earlier.

Simon's Relevant Hx

Reports essentially unremarkable family of origin.

Noteworthy is father's sudden death at 53 years old from MI.

Simon received his CA dx on the eve of his 53rd birthday.

Recalls the 4-5 years prior to diagnosis feeling like he was "just waiting to die." Reports thinking he would never live beyond his 53rd birthday.

Simon's Sexual Slide

- Sexually happy in marriage.
- Monogamous for entire marriage.
- Approximately 5 months after surgery, began to visit strip clubs, massage parlors, prostitutes with increasing frequency. Says it felt "obsessive." Had never done this type of activity before.
- Culminated in his impulsive decision to leave marriage. Ended up in North Carolina and starting picking up strange men in bars for sex. Reports this as first same-sex experiences. Meets a woman and takes her to New Orleans where following continued erectile loss, he attempts suicide by overdose.

Oliver

- 48 year old male, who was in the process of his second divorce.
- Was recently let go from high profile job due to “Human Resources” violations (i.e. he had complaints logged against him by several women in his company for his sexual advances).
- Described very satisfying sexual relationships with both wives.
- Had sex with wife’s best friend.
- Current divorce precipitated by getting caught in affair.

Oliver's Relevant Hx

- Both he and sister were adopted at birth.
- Clearly recalls mother's frequent psych hospitalizations in his early childhood years.
- His father died young, when Oliver was very young. He reported that all men in his family die young.
- Father's death left much of family responsibility in his lap, since mother was so unstable.

Oliver's Sexual Slide

- Recalls he became sexually 'obsessed' at age 33.
- Father died of MI at 62 years old.
- This was father's third MI—first was at age 33.

Alan

- Divorced twice, currently in long-term live-in relationship of 16 years duration.
- Having extra-marital affair for the past twelve years, as well as many other one-night-stands. Says felt “compelled” to do it.
- Treatment motivated by girlfriend’s discovery of his affair and her threat to end relationship.
- Met current girlfriend after near-death experience from auto accident.

Alan's Relevant Hx

- Oldest of 6 children.
- Mother died from CA when he was 12 years old.
- Father remarried a year later, and they had two more children.
- Step-mother died when he was 19 years old, also from CA.
- Father died at 57 years old from cirrhosis of the liver.
- Says always believed he would die young.

Alan's Sexual Slide

- After mother's death, he had little supervision. Fell in with older, "rough" crowd, and was exposed to much sexual stimuli (pornography).
- Came to believe that women could not be trusted to stick around.
- Through treatment, came to see that the "meaning" of much of his extra-marital involvement was to always have a "spare" woman. Had tremendous fears of "running out" and "not having enough."

Steven

- 42 year old married man.
- Reports a companionable, pleasant, but unsatisfying marriage of 15 years.
- Says past 4-5 years he has felt that wife was “controlling” the marriage—that he had no say in decision-making.
- 3 years ago, mother-in-law (who reports feeling closer to than his own parents), died suddenly. He then began seeking out men for sex. Reports this as being first same-sex experience.
- Therapy precipitated by discovery of affair.

Steven's Relevant Hx.

- As a child, often felt “trapped” at home. Dysfunctional family of origin—he was mediator between constantly fighting parents.
- Recalls as a child always being fearful of death, and losing others. Reports crying uncontrollably about this, although he is unsure as to why. As an adult, he says he continues to be preoccupied with thoughts of death and loss.
- In discussing marriage, he reports feeling trapped and a “loss of vitality.” He describes self as feeling like a “ghost in his own home.”
- Says sex with men was an effort to “shock himself,” and to be “courageous and try new things.” Feared he was missing out on too much of life. Says he was feeling a strong undercurrent of “needing to do something to feel alive.”

Steven's Sexual Slide

- Despite marital dissatisfaction, he was monogamous. He did have a “flirtation” with a woman and work who let him know she would like to take it further. He declined, but began to have serious thoughts about how his life could be different, and that he was “missing out” on much of the joy of living.
- Sudden death of mother-in-law set off an uncharacteristic sexual spree that was primarily focused on sex with men.

A New View of Sexual Addiction: The Existential Perspective

Existential psychotherapy teaches us that diagnosis and treatment on the basis of symptoms misses the *meaning* of these symptoms and behaviors and thus dehumanize the individual.

- Existential psychotherapy suggests that symptoms are often over-determined, and are expressions of attempts to defend against existential anxieties.
- As a result, our treatment looks to soothe the *death-anxiety*, not the sexual behavior. In order to do this, we have to give the sexual acting-out “meaning.”
- Therefore, we must remember to look for the “story,” not just the chronology of events.

Treatment

- Very important to trace the timeline of sexual acting out.
- Explore in details, relevant experiences during the identified start time.
- Ask about early-life death experiences (especially loss of parent).
- You look to soothe the death-anxiety, not focus on the sexual behavior, per se. It is necessary to give the sexual behavior “meaning.”

Treatment

- The death anxiety of many people is fueled ... by disappointment at never having fulfilled their potential. Many people are in despair because their dreams didn't come true, and they despair even more that they did not make them come true. A focus on this deep dissatisfaction is often the starting point in overcoming death anxiety.
- IRVIN D. YALOM, *Staring at the Sun*

Treatment

- Though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death may save us.”
- — Irvin D. Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients*

Non-Sexual Trauma and Sex Offending

- The case of Pete

Professional Sexual Misconduct

- The Case of Carlos

Let's Have a Discussion!

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