Chapter 2. Existential anxiety: Background, concepts and proposal for a theoretical model

2.1 Introduction

During the first week of my depression, I had a very scary experience. I was having breakfast with my husband and daughter. Suddenly everything felt different and very strange. I saw the plates, knives and cups, but they seemed to have lost their meaning. My husband and daughter were still the same persons to me, but at the same time they seemed like strangers. It was hard to breathe, and I felt like I was suffocating. My whole body contracted, as if it had become an empty shell from which all that was ‘me’ had slipped away. I tried to say something, but could not find the words. Later that morning, I found myself lying on the couch. I tried to find out what to do but couldn’t. Life itself seemed to have lost all meaning, and I felt utterly hopeless.

Ms. W., 42 years, teacher

It is not uncommon for therapists to hear patients like Ms. W. trying to speak about their experiences. Patients struggle to share these deeply disturbing and very personal feelings that sometimes can only be expressed through highly metaphorical language. In their most extreme variants, these experiences can be part of a psychosis, such as the Cotard delusion, in which someone is convinced to be dead, to not exist anymore, or to no longer possess a body (Ratcliffe, 2008). However, such experiences are not exclusively related to psychosis, but are also reported by people with anxiety or mood complaints, or by people without a mental

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1This chapter is partly based on:

illness. Famous novelists, like Albert Camus, Paul Sartre, Boeli van Leeuwen and the Dutch writer Gerard Reve, have all created protagonists who struggle with feelings of hopelessness, extreme guilt or estrangement. Often these kinds of experiences are labelled ‘existential.’ At this point, we regard ‘existential’ as meaning ‘existence as such’ or ‘existence as a whole’. Later we will come back to the question whether these types of experiences form a separate category, and what the distinctive characteristics of such a category might be.

Mainstream psychiatry and psychology do not pay much attention to these experiences, although traces can be found in the widely used diagnostic manual DSM 5. For example, the manual includes feelings of emptiness as a criterion for Borderline Personality Disorder and mentions feelings of estrangement as possibly accompanying panic attacks. However, most therapeutic interventions and clinical research have focused on more concrete aspects of psychopathology, such as biological changes, negative thinking, and/or avoidance behavior.

The abstract character of existential experiences does make it difficult to conduct research on them; however, as we will argue later, such research is not impossible. To maintain a distinct focus in this chapter, we concentrate on existential anxiety, although often other emotions, like anger, disgust and sadness, are mentioned. We also leave aside positive existential experiences, like hope, self-transcendence, a sense of wholeness, or meaning in life. We start by giving a historical description of different theoretical and empirical traditions that have deliberated on existential anxiety (EA). The second part of this chapter provides a description of concepts that are important for the understanding of EA, for example: defense mechanisms, existential concerns, the role of consciousness, self-reflection and self-relatedness. This description is then followed by our own theoretical model, which states that while the relationship between a person and the world is at stake in EA, also at risk is how a person relates to him or herself.

2.2 History
Because human beings are capable of reflection, they have, throughout history, pondered their existence and tried to give meaning to life. Residuals of this process can be found in old inscriptions and in religious documents. In Ecclesiastes, part of the biblical wisdom literature, the author reflects on the meaning of life and concludes; “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.” (Ch. 1,14-15). Greek philosophers who lived in the centuries before the common era, are still famous for their written dialogues
about meaning, the finiteness of life, and how to make appropriate choices. Our discussion, however, begins with existential philosophy of the twentieth century as well as two other relevant traditions that are strongly related to and partly overlap with existential philosophy – namely, anthropological psychiatry and phenomenology. Next we draw attention to the therapists who found inspiration in existential philosophy, and we briefly describe some recent developments within the family of existential therapies. In closing, we describe the empirical research that focuses on existential experiences, paying particular attention to correlational research on death anxiety and the experimental research presented in Terror Management Theory. This entire historical summary must be seen as a limited description, in which only some important contributors to the field can be mentioned. A clear and concise description of the history of existential psychotherapies, including more recent developments, is fully explored by Cooper in *Existential Therapies* (2003).

### 2.2.1 Philosophical background

The field of existential philosophy is broad, and its representatives are diverse. Philosophers from the second half of the twentieth century, for example, Sartre, Camus and De Beauvoir, are often regarded as eponymous, but they refer to the work of earlier thinkers. Important precursors are Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Kierkegaard (1843/1954a) wrote about anxiety as being more than an emotion, namely a way of relating to oneself, and worked out the often used distinction between fear as a feeling with a specific object, and anxiety as a free-floating experience. Heidegger (1927/1979) did not typify himself as existential philosopher, but elaborated on many themes that would become important in existential thinking. We first turn our attention to existential philosophy in a more narrow sense and specifically examine the meaning of the word existential. The existential philosophy of the twentieth century can be seen partly as a reaction to the mainstream development of philosophy of that time, which existential thinkers disputed as being too rationalist and too remote from what really mattered to people. Existential thinkers criticized the use of rational or empirical methods to deduce universal truths and tried to bring ‘life’ back to philosophy. The word ‘existential’ refers to the existence of man, which precedes the coincidental circumstances in which someone finds him or herself at a certain time. For example, a man can think about his being male, and what this means for his standing in the world, but at a deeper level he may find out that this refers to his being human, and belonging to a species that, among other things, is qualified by having a certain gender. He shares this aspect of being human with all other persons, which is
not the case for his accidentally being a man. At an even deeper level, this idea refers to being born into a world that has boundaries, such as having a certain gender, without the possibility to choose not to be there or not to be subjected to these boundaries. At the same time, a male individual is free to reflect on his life and can choose how he wishes to answer the givens of life. When not being content with being male, he might see his gender as an unmovable cornerstone or as a changeable position, for example, through transgender surgery. This short example shows that, with some reflection, one can conclude that human existence is typified by contradictions, for example, being free to choose while, at the same time, being limited by the givens of life. Existential philosophy did not limit itself to analysing topics such as boredom, death, guilt, responsibility and autonomy, but also offered guidance about how to face life’s contradictions. Being authentically oneself by facing what cannot be changed, and/or going one’s own way instead of being influenced by the crowd, are examples of the kind of advice offered by existential philosophy. At this point the transition from philosophy to psychotherapy can easily be made.

In addition to existential philosophy, other theories are essential when examining our subject, such as anthropological psychiatry and phenomenology. Anthropological psychiatry came to the fore mainly in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Theorists of abnormal psychology, like Goldstein and Kronfeld, related psychopathology to questions about the human condition in general. Goldstein describes anxiety as more than just an emotion; it expresses that a person is hindered in his or her striving for self-realisation. Kronfeld (1935) relates this to death anxiety and sees anxiety as the opposite of the ‘synthetic force of the I’. Anxiety denotes the threat of the decomposing of personality and the possible downfall of existence (Van Bruggen et al., 2014). Theorists who apply the phenomenological method to analyse pathological experiences are also relevant for understanding the theoretical development of existential anxiety. Phenomenology has a long history as a philosophical discipline, but was developed into a tradition by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Central in the phenomenological method is the effort to become aware of one’s own presuppositions, bracket them as far as possible, and try to focus on the primary experience of things themselves. One example of this method is the analysis of the experience of the ‘self’ and changes to this experience during the course of a psychotic disorder, to which we will return later in this chapter.
2.2.2 Existential psychotherapies

Psychotherapists who connect themselves to the field of existential psychotherapies are just as diverse as their theoretical background. We will address three examples of existential therapies: Daseinsanalyse, Logotherapy, Humanistic Existential Psychotherapy, and also briefly mention some new developments, mainly in the United Kingdom.

Among all the existential psychotherapies, Daseinsanalyse is probably the most outspoken about its relationship to philosophy. It refers back to the philosophy of Heidegger, who inspired Binswanger and Boss in developing a therapeutic method that has its starting point in the presupposition that human experience is inextricably bound to its being-in-the-world. Problems may arise when certain aspects of the world are excluded from human experience, and it is the task of the therapist to offer patients guidance in finding their blind spots and blockades that might hinder them from opening to the fullness of life. The aim of therapy is to face life in a state of openness and gelassenheit (acceptance).

A second example of an existential psychotherapy is Logotherapy, based on the work of Frankl. The psychiatrist Frankl laid the foundation of Logotherapy in the years before World War II, and he was mainly inspired by the phenomenologist Hegel. An Austrian Jew, Frankl became a victim of the Nazi regime and survived four concentration camps. He wrote about these experiences in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1962) that became a worldwide bestseller. The central message of his book is that persons need meaning to live a fulfilling and healthy life. The search for meaning can be blocked by neurosis and self-destructive behaviors, like addiction. It is the task of a logotherapist to assist the patient, like a midwife, to overcome these blockades and to reconnect to the meaning of life. In this process, the therapist uses techniques such as giving directives (mainly during the early phase of therapy), Socratic dialogue, de-reflection, and paradoxical intention exercises. More recently, Logotherapy has evolved into the development of Meaning Therapy, a therapy that is mainly applied to persons with cancer or other somatic illnesses.

Another therapeutic application that has found broad recognition was developed by the American psychiatrist and group psychotherapist Yalom (1980), and his mentor May (1983). Moving beyond Daseinsanalyse and Logotherapy, May and Yalom pay attention to intrapsychic processes, in accordance with a psychodynamic model of the human mind. Instead of the Freudian dark forces of “das Es” (the id), Yalom views anxiety as provoked by the givens of existence – for example, by death, fundamental loneliness and meaninglessness – as the driving force behind the dynamics of the mind. Neurotic anxiety is seen as a result of the negation of existential anxiety. The therapist’s task is to search for dysfunctional defense
mechanisms that the patient has developed to handle existential anxiety and help clarify them. Focusing on body sensations, dream clarification, self-disclosure and reflecting on the therapeutic relationship are examples of interventions that may be used. Facing the unmovable cornerstones of existence may be a liberating experience that allows for growth and personal development. Yalom has a humanistic vision of human development, hence this therapy is referred to as Humanistic Existential Psychotherapy.

In addition, new developments in the field of existential psychotherapies can be found in the United Kingdom. Despite their diversity, they share an interest in therapeutic applications of the phenomenological method and a critical distance from the medical model. Emmy van Deurzen (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2011) has described in different therapy books how a therapist can help someone to gain more insight into one’s vision of life and possible blind spots. Her model of the four worlds, the physical, social, personal and spiritual worlds, may be helpful for this enterprise. Other well-known representatives are Ernesto Spinelli and Hans Cohn. Therapists from these newer branches of existential therapies are critical towards the use of standardized intervention techniques. Instead, they pay more attention to a warm and open therapeutic attitude and to working towards insights by asking the right kind of questions and by adopting an explorative attitude in one’s conversation with the patient.

2.2.3 Empirical research
A combination of the often highly abstract constructs of existential thinkers with concrete quantifiable empirical research might seem implausible. Is it possible to quantify existential experiences and apply an empirical method to learn more about them? Existential theorists are often sceptical at best about the use of a quantifying method for studying human experience. Yalom (1980), for example, states that the human mind is far too flexible to be studied by standard measures, and that there is an unbridgeable gap between questionnaire results and the lived experience. For others, empirical research can have an (albeit limited) value for the study of human experience (Cooper, 2004). Research in the field of existential experiences has mainly focused on death anxiety and on positive experiences, like meaning and purpose.

We start with describing the current research on death anxiety and then turn to the experimental tradition called Terror Management Theory. We conclude with a description of clinical research.

Well-known for his research on death anxiety, Neimeyer published the Death Anxiety Handbook (1994), which includes an oversight of research instruments and applications.
Furthermore, two journals explicitly address research on death and the different emotional reactions it might provoke, namely Omega – Journal of Death and Dying and Death Studies. For a long time, research on death anxiety relied mostly on self-reporting measures, and the Death Anxiety Scale (DAS), developed by Templer (2008), is the best known example. This scale consists of 15 diverse items that relate to death and it has no subscales. The DAS has been increasingly criticised, and alternative scales were developed that tried to do more justice to the multidimensional character of reactions to death and dying, for example, the Collet-Lester Fear of Death Scale, the Threat Index, the Death Attitude Profile-Revised, and the Fear of Personal Death Scale (Neimeyer, 2003, 1994). Death anxiety was found to be related to gender, age, psychopathology, and religiousness, although results differ per study. Researchers report, for example, higher as well as lower levels of death anxiety for women, dependent on which measurement is used. Probably this results from a difference in attitude towards death, which might be more practical and evaluative for women and more abstract for men, resulting in higher or lower outcomes on questionnaires that differ in item content (Neimeyer, 1994). Also death anxiety’s relationship to religiousness appears to be complex. For example, being more convicted in one’s own world-orientation corresponds with less death anxiety, regardless of the content of the world-orientation (Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004). Thus, convicted atheists as well as those with religious convictions have been found to correlate negatively with death anxiety, although the direction of this relationship is still unclear. Furthermore, it is important to mention that death anxiety depends on cultural factors (Kuhl & Koole, 2004). Respondents from Arabic countries reported, for example, aspects of death anxiety that were previously unknown in the research mainly conducted in the USA. Studies have shown that mental health complaints, such as, anxiety, depression, and neuroticism in general, correlate positively with death anxiety, but the direction of this relationship is also not specified (Neimeyer et al., 2004). Mindfulness offers protection against death anxiety (Niemiec et al., 2010) as well as self-efficacy, defined as the trust in one’s own capability to solve problems (Fry, 2003).

From the multiple studies on death anxiety, a picture arises of a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In fact, researchers mention between three and twenty different dimensions (Conte, Weiner, & Plutchik, 1982). The first essential question is whether the anxiety relates to one’s own death or the possible death of a loved one. Secondly, there are different aspects to death that may provoke anxiety, for example, the unpredictability of the moment of dying, the possibility of suffering, having to leave behind loved ones, or not being able to finish important projects. In much research on death anxiety, these different
aspects are taken together, resulting in unclear conclusions. Also the heavy reliance on self-reporting measures limits the possibilities of theoretical development. However, beside this correlational research, an experimental tradition has developed, known as Terror Management Theory (TMT). An important cornerstone was the publication of the *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, edited by Greenberg, Koole, and Pyszczynski (2004), with thirty chapters about a wide array of research related to death anxiety. Theory underlying TMT focuses on defense mechanisms that are used to handle anxiety provoked by the awareness of the finiteness of life. The most important example of these defense mechanisms is cultural world defense, the human tendency to cling to one’s own subculture in reaction to death anxiety, to be more dismissive of alterations to one’s culture, and even more hostile to other cultures. In hundreds of experiments, people were often confronted with their own mortality when answering questions on this topic. Persons in the experimental condition showed more conservativeness with regard to their own culture and also more hostility to persons from other cultures, which, for example, emerged as an increased willingness to hurt someone. This effect also could be differentiated from the reaction to imaginative feelings of pain and/or rejection by other persons. However, researchers are not unequivocal on this point and debate is ongoing whether cultural world defense reactions are indeed specific for dealing with the awareness of one’s own mortality or a reaction to, for example, fear of loss (e.g. Koca-Atabey & Öner-Özkan, 2014).

Effect studies on existential psychotherapies are scarce, which may be a result of the often critical attitude or rejection of empirical research by many of the founders of existential thought. However, in a recent meta-analysis of 15 studies on existential psychotherapies, unique data were found, from which a subset of six meaning therapies showed large positive effects for the experience of meaning and moderate positive effects for psychopathology and self-efficacy (Vos, Craig, & Cooper, 2015). By far, most of the research has been conducted on meaning focused therapies. These therapies focus on experiences of meaning, but also negative experiences, such as existential anxiety, are addressed. However, the question whether paying attention to negative existential experiences adds to these encouraging effect sizes remains unanswered.
2.3 Concepts

In this section, we more closely examine existential anxiety, specifically focusing on aspects relevant for our research project. First we will consider the question whether a difference can be made between normal and pathological existential anxiety. This discussion is important for the demarcation of our research population and the choice of validation instruments. Next we see that EA has both pre-reflective and reflective aspects and that these aspects are essential for choosing the right measurement methods. In the following two subsections, we then consider the content of EA as an expression of a person’s relatedness to the world as well as to him or herself. We then close with a description of the conceptual model that forms the foundation of our research project.

2.3.1 The difference between normal and pathological existential anxiety

Literature about existential anxiety often stresses that these feelings are connected with human existence in general, and that they do not exclusively belong to the domain of psychopathology. For example, according to May (1950/1977), Yalom (1980), Ratcliffe (2005), Tillich (1952), and Glas (2001), only a relative difference can be seen between the normal and pathological variants of existential experiences, among which is anxiety. May and Yalom state that existential anxiety is universal, just because it is inseparable from the existence that is shared by all people: “Obviously the schizophrenic patient’s defenses are more exotic, more extreme and more disabling than those of the neurotic patient … But the existential nature of human reality makes brothers and sisters of us all” (Yalom, 1980, p. 148).

At the same time, it is clear that some forms of existential anxiety are pathological and even prognostic or typical for certain pathological conditions. Changes in self-relatedness have, for example, been shown to be precursors of schizophrenia (Nelson et al., 2009; Van de Kraats, De Haan, & Meynen, 2012). This raises the questions: 1) Can some forms of existential anxiety be typified as pathological and 2) if so, by which criteria? Before we reflect on these questions and discuss some possible criteria, it is important to acknowledge that it is also difficult to differentiate, in general, between normal and pathological mental states. Often the demarcation is sought in the suffering subjectively felt by the patients and the extent to which the patients’ life is limited by their complaints. These two criteria are also mentioned in the preamble of the DSM 5. In the search for a demarcation between pathological and normal existential anxiety, we subsequently discuss the interruptive character of the anxiety, the
defense mechanisms that are deployed to handle it, and the consequences of anxiety on someone’s functioning.

Some authors mention a discontinuous character as typical for pathological existential anxiety, meaning that these feelings become pathological as far as they correspond with a crisis in someone’s life that arises because beliefs about the world have suddenly become questionable or even invalid (Vos, 2014). Fuchs (2013) states:

The deep [sic] felt impact [of limit situations] that ‘yanks the carpet away from under one’s feet’ and that breaks down the ‘housing’ around one’s life plan can also shake the foundations of one’s mental constitution to the extent that mental illnesses may result (p. 303).

The idea of discontinuity in beliefs can also be found in the trauma literature, for example, in the work of Herman (2010) and Janoff-Bulman (1992). Janoff-Bulman has posited that people develop a set of basic assumptions about the world, among which the expectation that other people are trustworthy and that the world is a place in which righteousness dominates. In a traumatic situation, it turns out that these assumptions are not valid, and this might lead to psychopathology. Existential anxiety may thus be connected with pathology if there is a break with former experiences. When reflecting on this criterion, it seems plausible that people strive for continuity, and that discontinuity is one of the aspects of psychopathology, in general, and specifically of existential anxiety, when the discontinuity concerns life in general, as is the case with major trauma. However, there remain some problematic points with this criterion. Discontinuity can, for example, also have positive effects. Even traumatic happenings can, in the long run, lead to positive outcomes, like personal growth (Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004). Beside this, it cannot be overlooked that some pathological conditions are chronic, for example, personality disorders and sometimes mood disorders. Although there is no discontinuity, these disorders may simultaneously align with an experience of the world that by other people might be judged as highly dysfunctional. Consequently, the aspect of discontinuity may be helpful to understand some (existential) pathological conditions, but is not sufficient to distinguish them from healthy variants.

We now focus on three other aspects that may be typical for pathological existential anxiety. Part of the literature on existential anxiety is strongly based on psychodynamic thinking and stresses that pathological existential anxiety can be recognized by: 1) its cause being an internal conflict instead of a realistic threat, 2) the defense mechanisms that are deployed and 3) the impact of childhood experiences as an explanatory factor. May (1950/1977) typifies existential anxiety as pathological when there it has no connection with a real threat. Death
anxiety of a soldier in a war can, for example, be seen as normal anxiety. In contrast, the panic attacks of a hypochondriac can possibly be understood in connection with an internal conflict, for example, the conflict between striving for autonomy and, at the same time, the need to feel connected to other persons as a shelter against the threat of death. Whether death anxiety is caused by an internal rather than realistic threat is obviously a problematic criterion, because this dilemma is inherently human, and does not exclusively develop into a problematic state of being. May (1950/1977) admits that even when the cause of existential anxiety is an internal conflict, it is still not sufficient enough to demarcate pathological variants:

When all is said and done, all anxiety arises from conflicts, with its origin in the conflict between being and nonbeing, between one’s existence and that which threatens it. All of us, no matter how ”neurotic” or “normal,” experience the gap between our expectations and reality (p. 350).

In psychodynamic thinking much attention is given to the defense mechanisms that are used to deal with internal conflicts. Yalom (1980) has determined that defense mechanisms also come into play in the handling of the above mentioned existential conflicts. Defense mechanisms that are rigid and manifest negatively might typify a pathological condition. As Yalom (1980) states:

Either because of extraordinary stress or because of an inadequacy of available defensive strategies, the individual who enters the realm called “patienthood” has found insufficient the universal modes of dealing with death fear and has been driven to extreme modes of defense. These defensive manoeuvres, often clumsy modes of dealing with terror, constitute the presenting clinical picture (p. 111).

Yalom gives different examples of these pathological defenses, for example, strong dependence on other persons and extreme ideas about the specialness of the own person. Seeing oneself as very special can be a way to avoid the awareness of death as a fate that awaits all people. Even when the character of the defense mechanisms is accepted as a demarcation between pathological and normal anxiety, the question remains why some people have better defenses than others. Different authors (e.g., Fuchs, 2013; May, 1950/1977) have pointed to the influence of childhood experiences. An early confrontation with the grim side of life, during which the child still lacks the possibility to constructively deal with such experiences, might cause mental injuries that later in life make the adult more sensitive when confronted with existential concerns. In this regard, it seems telling that persons who hold insecure styles of attachment often have been traumatized in their childhood and also more
often struggle with existential concerns (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Koole, 2004). In clinical practice, the relationship between psychopathological complaints and vulnerability can turn out to be even more complex. There is seldom a straightforward relationship between a certain cause and a pathological condition, and usually multiple factors must be taken into account. What is presented as an existential problem may, for example, be a symptom of a temporary clinical syndrome or even a way to avoid paying attention to other problems. As mentioned above, pathological defense mechanisms can be typified by rigidness and their negative consequences. People sometimes pay a high price for avoiding the confrontation with the fundamental limitations of life. For example, trying to hide from the responsibility of one’s own life and the choices that can be made can lead to endless procrastination and a stagnation of personal development (Glas, 2001). Tillich (1952) states “Neurosis is the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being. In the neurotic-state self-affirmation is not lacking; …But the self which is affirmed is a reduced one” (emphasis in original, p. 66). Also Ratcliffe (2005) works out that problematic existential experiences may cause someone to retreat from his or her shared social world and that these experiences restrict the possibilities that life offers.

It is this isolation from others, this retreat from a shared world, which often prompts them to regard the person as ill, even if that person seems quite happy. And it is this, I will now suggest, that serves to identify an existential feeling as existentially pathological (emphasis in original, p. 284).

With this last criterion, we return to the point at which we started this section. Although we have seen that there are individual differences in the way existential concerns are dealt with, it seems impossible to find a clear-cut criterion to differentiate between healthy and pathological variants of existential anxiety. The difference seems not to be found in the nature of the experience itself, but rather in the consequences it has on someone’s life, and this is in accordance with the general definition of psychopathology. It also alludes to the question: What can be seen as healthy functioning in general? And an answer to this question depends on the anthropological standpoint that is chosen.

2.3.2 Consciousness and reflection
Do animals experience existential anxiety? At what age do human beings have existential experiences? Is it, for example, possible to classify the separation anxiety of very young children as existential? These questions are related to the role that consciousness and
reflection play in existential anxiety. Both concepts are used in this section, whereby reflection signifies the verbalizing of experiences. Thus, someone can become conscious of a certain phenomenon without reflecting upon it. We selected the word consciousness, although awareness might be used and may be a considered a similar concept. In the literature about existential anxiety, it is often stressed that these experiences have strong bodily and pre-reflective characteristics. We illustrate this standpoint using publications of Ratcliffe. Next we describe that existential anxiety is multi-layered, and that, at least for some of its aspects, reflection is essential.

In the past years, the British philosopher Ratcliffe (e.g. 2005, 2008, 2008/2011) has called attention to existential experiences, which he labels as ‘feelings of being’. Ratcliffe’s focus is, in general, on feelings that form a background to experience and feelings that structure other experiences. For example, the awareness that something is ‘true’ or ‘not true’, or that something is ‘strange’ or ‘normal’. Ratcliffe (2005) strongly emphasizes the role of the body in these experiences, from which he has derived the term ‘bodily feelings’. At the same time, he acknowledges that it is possible to consciously reflect on such feelings:

[These feelings] are ordinarily part of the background structure of experience, constituting ways of finding oneself in a world that shape more specific experiences. Nevertheless, they are phenomenologically available, as is evident from the various, usually metaphorical descriptions employed to communicate them. So they are part of the structure of experience, rather than an experientially inaccessible contributor to that structure. However, there may be a thin line between noetic and prennoetic aspects of existential feeling. For example, the role of feeling in constituting our sense of reality […] is perhaps something that is hidden beneath everyday experience and can only be made phenomenologically explicit through reflection upon highly unusual states of oneself or others (p. 50).

Reflection thus plays a role in the existential experiences as described by Ratcliffe, but only afterwards, by reflecting on experiences that are implicit or have only briefly crossed the threshold of consciousness. Once an individual becomes aware of a certain experience, then he or she is able to articulate it. In accordance with Ratcliffe’s ideas, Glas (2003) also differentiates between existential anxiety and consciousness:

At a deeper level [compared to behavioral, (neuro) physiological and cognitive frameworks] however, there are aspects of the phenomenon of anxiety that cannot be accounted for by such an objectifying approach…. It is my impression that this more basic or fundamental anxiety is often related to pervasive and global feelings of
unconnectedness, powerlessness, absurdity and/or doubt. Anxiety is, in these cases, not primarily the consciousness of being unconnected, out of control, and unable to make choices. It is rather the ways in which this powerlessness, unconnectedness, and lack of control are embodied and lived. Understanding anxiety from an anthropological perspective means that one understands the crucial importance of this conceptual shift – the shift from anxiety of ‘something’ to anxiety as an elementary expression of an underlying central theme in a person’s life (emphasis in original, p. 165).

With regard to the role of consciousness and reflection, these descriptions contrast with the ideas of some authors from the existential psychotherapeutic tradition. May (1950/1977) and Yalom (1980), for example, seem to aim at a different category of experiences when they describe EA as a reaction to death, meaninglessness, guilt, and fundamental loneliness – concerns that are inextricably bound to the human capability of reflection. At the same time, May and Yalom state that unconscious processes play an important role in existential anxiety. This same apparent contradiction can be seen in the tradition of experimental existential psychology, as Sullivan (2012) posits:

Most current XXP [experimental existential psychology] theories assume that threats activate defenses outside of conscious awareness. Based on the extant literature, it would certainly be folly to question this assumption. Nevertheless, … many theorists emphasize that the experience of existential threat is inseparable from the human capacity for self-awareness (p. 751).

We started this section with the question as to whether animals or very young children are also capable of experiencing existential anxiety. At least some authors stress the bodily, preverbal character of EA, which can be understood to resemble the anxiety reactions of animals and young children. At the same time, it is obvious that consciousness and reflection play a role in EA’s derivatives and more differentiated variants in three ways. First, for some existential anxieties, such as fear of meaninglessness, the forming of ideas about coherence and purpose of events is a prerequisite. Although resemblances to reactions of animals at a basic level can be found, for example, distress in reaction to goal conflicts or uncertainty (McGregor, 2004), at the same time, the need for coherence and purpose is elaborated in complex meaning systems. For example, political or religious convictions are exclusive for human functioning and have as a prerequisite the capacity for reflecting and exchanging abstract ideas with other persons. Secondly, consciousness plays a role in the existential anxiety itself. In general persons are just partly aware of the so called ‘existential concerns’,
and when these concerns are brought into awareness, the result may be existential anxiety. Thirdly, reflection is vital afterwards. Human beings are able to reflect on their own experiences and relate themselves to these experiences. Someone can, for example, become aware of feelings of estrangement and then develop an attitude towards these feelings, such as curiosity, acceptance or resistance.

We can conclude that with regard to the role of consciousness and reflection, EA turns out once again to be complex and multi-layered. We think that the concept of self-relatedness, which we explore in Section 1.3.5, is helpful for understanding the different aspects of existential anxiety and their interrelatedness.

### 2.3.3 Description of ultimate concerns

EA might distinguish itself from other forms of anxiety by not being directed at an object. However, often certain ultimate concerns, threats, givens of life, life questions or limitations are mentioned that play an essential role in this form of anxiety. From now on we will use the term *concern* when referring to these various items found in the literature. We now present four classifications of existential concerns and briefly address whether a core concern prevails over the others.

To date, no golden standard for the classification of existential concerns exists, and this will probably remain the case. It is difficult to distinguish between different concerns and maybe even impossible, because existential experiences are very diverse and form a continuum rather than falling neatly into taxonomic boxes (Ratcliffe, 2005). Nevertheless, different models of existential concerns have been presented. The models of Tillich (1952), Yalom (1980), Glas (2003, 2013) and Terror Management Theory (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006), each describe between four and seven concerns. We chose these models because they are well-known and differ in time of creation and theoretical background, except for TMT, which is strongly inspired by the work of Yalom. Three concerns, namely death, meaninglessness and guilt are described in all four models, although with different formulations. Isolation can be found in the work of Yalom, Glas and TMT, and identity is only mentioned by Glas and TMT. It is important to mention that the theories that we used are not only based on existential philosophy, but also often on the (clinical) expertise of the author and applied sciences. Yalom, for example, not only cites Kierkegaard and Sartre, but also refers to psychodynamic theories and often uses case examples to clarify his concepts.
In this section, the three levels of philosophical foundation, applied science and clinical expertise are strongly intertwined. In Section 2.3.5, we propose a model that depicts the relatedness of the different concerns. In chapter 8, we will address the advances made in distinguishing different levels of analysis. From this point, follows a short description\(^2\) of five concerns, and one variant of death anxiety, namely anxiety in relation to physical threats. **Death**: Maybe the best known example of an existential concern is death. Sometimes existential anxiety seems even to be regarded as synonymous with death anxiety. A human being is able to reflect on the fact that his or her life will at some point in time end. The awareness of the possibility of one’s own non-existence may be seen as the core of this anxiety (Glas, 2001), although there are many more aspects, as previously mentioned in the section about empirical research on death anxiety. Tillich (1952), for example, sees fate, the contingency of all what happens to someone, as a relative variant of death anxiety. Glas (2001) describes lack of safety as a concern which is expressed in the individual’s attitude concerning the world as an unsafe place, in which at any time something life-threatening can happen. We will use this anxiety in relation to physical threats as a sub-variant of this concern in the development of our questionnaire, that is described in chapter 4 and 5. **Meaninglessness**: The awareness of one’s own fragility and the contingency of happenings is strongly related to the urge to find a reason for what happens and to give meaning to one’s life. Lack of meaning or discovering that a once cherished meaning system no longer suffices may give rise to strong feelings of anxiety, although this certainly is not the only possible reaction since it may also be accompanied by feelings of acceptance. Frankl (1962) describes the search for meaning as central to human existence, and an *existential vacuum*, the lack of meaning, as an important cause for dysfunctionality and health complaints. Glas (2003) describes that the matter-of-factness of life may provoke strong feelings of anxiety or even disgust. In general, a distinction can be made between meaning, experiencing coherency in what is happening, and purpose, defined as having goals that feel worthy to strive for. **Guilt**: Guilt is often mentioned together with shame. Both emotions are seen as moral or self-referential emotions that can be distinguished from basic emotions, like anger or anxiety. We will not address the ongoing discussion about the differences between guilt and shame (Tangney & Mashek, 2004), but focus on feelings of guilt. In the existential literature, at least two variants can be found. Tillich (1952), for example, stresses that feelings of guilt result

\(^2\) A schematic presentation of these concerns and how they are presented in the four models, can be found in table 1 in section 3.1.1.
from not living up to one’s own moral standard or to presupposed universal standards, which in case of the latter variant, he calls condemnation. In accordance with the existential philosophers Sartre and Camus, May (1950/1977) and Yalom (1980) hold a different perspective on guilt, namely, as not living up to the potentials of life. Life offers almost endless possibilities, but the awareness of these possibilities can give rise to dizziness or the anxiety of making the wrong choice which one might regret later. Choosing always means that something else can not be chosen. Although, in accordance with the existing literature, we use the word guilt for these feelings, the word regret is possibly more accurate. Realizing one’s responsibility for one’s own choices can give rise to feelings of groundlessness, anxiety, procrastination or even paralysis, which can prevent one from making a choice (Glas, 2003). Despite the differences between conceptualizations of guilt, they all stress actorship. To a certain extent, people are able to shape their own life circumstances and having at least the illusion of giving direction to one’s life is an important prerequisite for well-being, as we will see in Section 2.3.4. In addition to death, meaninglessness and guilt, some of the models also mention two other concerns: isolation and identity.

Isolation: Human beings are seen as intrinsically social beings. Living together with other persons and having a satisfactory social network contributes to one’s health and feelings of well-being. At the same time, the connection with other people is often problematic, and even in the company of beloved ones, it is possible to feel loneliness. Yalom (1980) has analyzed these feelings from an existential perspective and described how they are connected with being an individual and never being able to fully share someone else’s perspective on the world. Although feelings of isolation are most profound in relation to one’s social world, they are not exclusive for relations with fellow human beings. It is also possible to feel isolated from one’s surroundings and the physical world.

Identity: This concern follows naturally from the former. Being an individual can be felt as problematic in a different way, namely that also this individuality is never fully certain. It is impossible to have complete self-insight or to be in full control over one’s own person. Also the boundaries between self and the surrounding world may turn out to be less clear than often presupposed, for example, when finding out how strongly our self-image and our choices are influenced by external factors. TMT (Koole et al., 2006) has mentioned this fifth source of EA, and it is a central theme in the work of Glas and his description of existential anxiety as being related to loss of structure in the relation to oneself and the world (Glas, 2001, 2003, 2013). In the next section, we elaborate on this point when we introduce the concept of self-relatedness.
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Our description of these five existential concerns may seem to be arbitrary and their boundaries not very strict; they are likely to overlap in actual personal experiences. Thinking about the finiteness of life may, for example, be accompanied by the anxiety that one is missing out on things and strong feelings of meaninglessness. It remains unclear whether there is a relationship between these concerns, what that relationship may be, and if these five concerns are necessary and sufficient to classify existential anxieties. These issues relate to the discussion about the core concern, mostly labeled as the core threat. The debate about the core threat concerns the question whether there exists one central threat, from which all others are derived. The candidate that is most often brought forward is the finiteness of life, but also others are mentioned, for example, uncertainty, loss of control, social exclusion, meaninglessness (Sullivan, 2012), and the sociological concept of ontological insecurity (Friedman, 2010). If survival is seen as the basic drive of human beings, then it is understandable that the finiteness of life provokes the most basic form of anxiety and that other anxieties might be understood as the result of failing defense mechanisms that were developed to manage death anxiety. The confrontation with death motivates people, for example, to search for meaning in cultural worldviews, as highlighted by TMT research. The anxiety that results from loosing a meaning system could then be seen as the result of death anxiety, which is the underlying threat. Till now the debate about a core threat has not yielded a broadly accepted conclusion. Researchers have, for example, pointed out that threats related to uncertainty, failure and separation can also elicit one’s worldview defenses, which were deemed unique as reaction to death threats. The search for a core threat is complicated by the already mentioned interrelatedness of the different threats, and the fact that priming one of them also elicits the others (McGregor, 2004). Perhaps, it is more useful to develop a hybrid model in which attention is paid to each of different threats, as well as the possibility that one of these threats may have a causal influence on all the others (Sullivan, 2012).

2.3.4 The ‘self’ and self-regulation

In the previous section, we demonstrated how EA does not result from something outside the person but is inextricably bound to inner processes. The connection between EA and self-awareness has long been recognized. Ryan and Deci (2004) state:

Perhaps the one construct that pervades all existential concerns is that of self-awareness. Ernest Becker (1962) [in The Birth and Death of Meaning] argued that self-awareness is the most important feature that distinguishes human beings from
other animals and that it is this capacity for self-awareness that sets the stage for the existential terror that led to the development of culture and humankind as we know it today (p. 8).

Recent research has shown that the sense of having a self is less uniquely human than once thought (Mitchell, 2003), but concepts like the self and self-awareness are still relevant for understanding EA. This section focuses on the ‘self’, and also forms an introduction to our own conceptual model that is described in the next section.

The concept of the self has long been criticized in psychology because it was suspected to introduce dualism, or the much dreaded figure of the ‘homunculus’, and also because it could pave the way for re-entrance of the controversial concept of the free will (Nicholson, 2011). However, in the final decades of the twentieth century, attention to the concept of self experienced a revival (Callero, 2003). After a period in which a behavioristic view dominated and the concept of the self was disregarded as being mentalistic, and thus too vague for empirical research, the self was re-introduced in psychology by neo-Freudians, humanists, and symbolic interactionists in the midst of the twentieth century. In the following decades, the self came into the focus of empirical research, as a result of the cognitive revolution in psychology, and by the 1980s, the self had become a central topic in investigation and a unifying construct in theoretical development (Leary & Tangey, 2003).

The self can be described from three different perspectives: 1) basic self-awareness, 2) self-regulation, and 3) autobiographical self (see summary in Table 1). The perspective of basic self-awareness views the self as being strongly connected to bodily feelings, self-regulation sees the self as having the capacity to regulate its functioning and its interaction with its surroundings, and the autobiographical self is seen as ordering of knowledge about the self and long-term patterns in its functioning. Descriptions of these three perspectives partly overlap, as we will see in the rest of this section.
Table 1

*Three perspectives of the self and their summary description*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective of self</th>
<th>Summary description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic self-awareness</td>
<td>- Background for all experiences, first-person perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Strongly connected to bodily functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Mainly non-conscious, though at least partly available to reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>- Regulating self and its interaction with its surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Interaction between cognitions, emotions and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Mainly non-conscious, though open to conscious decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical self</td>
<td>- Ordering of knowledge about the self and self-regulation from a long-term perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Strongly connected to social and cultural surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Important in conscious decision making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Basic self-awareness.* The self is not only helpful in understanding mental processes from a scientific point-of-view, but can also be recognized in descriptions of everyday human experience. In general, people experience the world from a first-person perspective, i.e. from the perspective of ‘me as the person having these experiences’. These experiences manifest a certain coherence, thus as if one is ‘having a self’. This is often described as the ‘mineness’ of experience, i.e. the awareness of being the owner of one’s experiences. This awareness does not depend on language, and is pre-given with all other experiences. However great the tension might be between a certain experience and (the observed) reality, there remains no doubt in the experience itself that it is one’s own. Phenomenologists tend to connect the experience of mineness with the bodily aspects of human functioning. Physically, one can only be at one point in time and space; pre-reflective awareness of one’s body is by definition spatiotemporally located. It is from the perspective of this location that the world is experienced (Ratcliffe, 2005). Based on the field of neuroscience, Damasio (2010) also connects this first-person perspective with bodily feelings in his description of the protoself. This primitive, proprioceptive, form of self-awareness exists in newborn children, as
developmental psychology suggests, and forms the basis for self-awareness and self-reflection. One can only reflect when there is, as a starting point, a basic experience of the self (Van Gulick, 2014). Next to this description of the fundamental character of the first-person perspective and its rootedness in bodily functioning, the self has also been studied from the perspective of its ability to regulate its own functioning.

Self-regulation. The self that is active in what is called ‘self-regulation’, can best be seen as a dynamic ‘system’ that helps the individual to adapt to external challenges and, by doing so, to ‘regulate’ itself. As a result, this self is constantly changing, moving between states of equilibrium and change. This dynamic character is typical for healthy functioning and enables a human being to adapt to a constantly changing environment. The dynamic character of the self makes it optimally sensitive to even weak stimuli, and responsive to trial and error learning (Marks-Tarlow, 1999). The process of adapting the self to the environment is often described as self-regulation or self-control, with both terms used interchangeably, although the first one has the broadest meaning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003).

Emotions are an inextricable part of the functioning of the self, and form the keystone in self-regulation. On the one hand, emotions have the function of alerting the self to changes that may be of importance, and thus they influence the functioning of the other aspects, for example, stopping an activity and turning one’s attention to the surroundings. On the other hand, the self is regulating the emotions in a complex way. Not only does the self avoid negative emotions and instead strive for emotions with a positive hedonic tone, but also the self regulates emotions to reach higher order goals (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Damasio, 2010; Kuhl & Koole, 2004). For example, when tempted to take another cupcake from the plate, one can, for a moment, imagine one’s own body with substantial weight gain and use the negative emotions invoked to counterbalance the positive emotions connected to succumbing to the sweet temptation.

Parallel to the emotional side of self-regulation and strongly intertwined with it are cognitions. The difference between the emotional and the cognitive side of self-regulation has been typified as between a ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ system, respectively, with the first one operating in a fast and more global way, and the second one operating more precisely, but slower. This difference is also related to the different brain regions involved (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Cognitive-affective-action units can be seen as the building blocks of the self (Mischel & Morf, 2003), and these units are connected to situational characteristics, resulting in stable reaction patterns in specific situations and, at the same time, allowing for flexibility across situations. For example, when a police officer is confronted with aggressive behavior, his
cognitive-affective-action unit, which one might label as ‘professional police officer’, may be activated, helping him to stay calm and to react in an appropriate way. However, when confronted with aggression in a personal situation, perhaps a different unit would be activated.

**Autobiographical self.** Cognitive-affective-action units develop during one’s lifetime as a result of learning experiences and reflection, and they become organised in structures that can be described as ‘self-image’ or ‘autobiographical self’. The human capacity to think consciously about oneself makes it possible to deliberately change the content of cognitive-affective-action units, or – to a certain extent – influence their activation, for example, by goal setting with the intention of changing one’s behavior (Damasio, 2010). This experience of autonomy, i.e., one’s behavior being self-initiated, forms an inextricable part of everyday human experience, and correlates to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2004; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2003). The process of self-reflection and obtaining self-knowledge is not an isolated, individual process, but is strongly connected to social functioning (Callero, 2003).

Social interaction can even be seen as one of the most important functions of the self as a dynamic self-regulating system, because self-regulation makes it possible to override initial responses and to live up to complex cultural demands. The social character of the self can be found in the earliest phases of its development (Mischel & Morf, 2003). For example, primary care givers help newborn babies to learn more about themselves, mainly by touch and paraverbal interaction in the first years and later by transferring language, values, and categories for self-knowledge, as, for example, the verbalization of emotional experiences. During one’s lifetime, social interaction maintains its role as a major influence on the self’s functioning, as the interaction with others reshapes the self. In intimate relationships, the mechanism of “behavioral confirmation” is observed, acting to confirm the expectancies of the other, without the individual being conscious about this influence. A different mechanism of influence is that information about the other becomes included in the self to the extent that cognitive presentations of the self and others overlap (Aron, 2003). Next to the influence of dyadic relations, described in theories about the ‘relational self’, also group relationships exert influence on the self, described as a ‘collective self’ (Hogg, 2003). Well-known experiments from social psychology have shown that one’s perception and behavior can be altered by placing someone in a manipulated group setting (e.g. Asch, 1955). From a wider perspective, the social character of the self can be derived from cultural differences, for example, the often debated differences between independent and interdependent self-construal. Although these cultural differences turn out to be less black-and-white than once suggested, it is obvious that
self-experience is strongly connected to cultural surroundings (Cross, Hardin, & Gerecek-Swing, 2011).

We started this section with the statement that the concept of self is important for understanding EA. As we have previously described, the self can be seen as a dynamic system that is constantly striving for balance in its own functioning and its adjustment to the surroundings. In cases in which control is not possible, the self seeks to establish illusions to the contrary (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). However, our description of ultimate concerns in Section 2.3.3 shows that the surroundings of the self include certain uncontrollable boundaries, and it is in the relatedness to these boundaries that EA is experienced. Not only is EA experienced in how the self relates to external boundaries, but also in the way that it relates to its own functioning. Perhaps key is the fact that the self is limited in its possibilities to know and regulate its own functioning; full self-knowledge is impossible. Therefore, when the self reflects on its functioning, it often become apparent that a strong field of tension between different aspects of its functioning exists, and that goals that are relevant for certain aspects of the self are obstructed by other aspects. As we will see in the next section, these fields of tension within the self and in the interaction with its surroundings, form the stage for EA.

2.3.5 Proposed model

We are now ready to present our own model of EA. As we have outlined, there are many perspectives on EA and authors greatly differ in what they describe as characteristics of EA and what might be the demarcation between EA and other forms of anxiety. However, we think that many of these controversies can be solved by using a model that describes EA as the field of tension that exists in the relatedness between the self and the world and between different aspects of the self. As Sullivan (2012) posits: “Existential threat implies a deviation from the normal, taken-for-granted relationship between self and world – a deviation sharp enough for the self to intuit that her working understanding of herself or the world may be entirely called into question” (p. 738).

Before we present our model, we address the question whether EA is a specific kind of anxiety. We think that the difference often made between EA and more common fears is not sustainable and that EA is better understood as one side of a whole spectrum of aspects that describes fears and anxieties. Even in a common fear like spider phobia, it is possible to distinguish existential aspects, for example, the fear of losing control of oneself and the
unpredictability of the movements of the spider, which can be seen as reflections of the unpredictability of the world in general. It is difficult to imagine a fear that is not related to existence itself. Even at its most rudimentary level, for example, in the startle response, the changes that happen in an organism signal that there might be a threat to its existence, also when the organism quickly discovers that the threat was a false-alarm.

Although it is, in our opinion, always possible to distinguish an existential aspect in anxiety, at some moments this aspect comes to the fore. We also believe that while an existential aspect can be found in every anxiety, some anxieties can be typified as EA in a narrower sense, and from now on, we will focus on this class of experiences. We use as an example the feelings of uneasiness that one can have while walking on a dark night through an unknown part of a city. These feelings do not have a particular object, but make one aware of the possibility of all kind of threats, a possibility that also exists at other moments, but is not necessarily felt. This example brings us to the central point of our own model, namely that EA results from the relatedness between oneself and the world and between different aspects of the self. While walking through the dark streets, one is aware of the surroundings in a very specific way. Shadows are not just shadows that might be at other times unnoticed, but they obtain a threatening character and might even seem to be living a life of their own, as though they are able to attack. Of course, the character of the shadows did not change, but as a result of anxiety, the individual’s relationship to them has changed. These changes are accompanied by a different relationship to one’s own person. For example, the sound of one’s footsteps may come to the individual’s attention and seem strange and far too loud. An urge may be felt in one’s legs to hasten steps, as if the legs were trying to take over the command of the self. As a result, when fear enters the stage, everything that might be smooth and unnoticed on a relaxed walk on a sunny morning changes, and these changes can, in our opinion, only be fully understood in their interrelatedness. This point is illustrated by the ongoing debate for decades as to whether the primacy of emotions lies in physical changes or in the subjective awareness of threat. The fact that, till now, this debate has never come to a conclusion (Wassmann, 2010) can be seen as proof that it might be more fruitful to use a structural model of anxiety instead of a linear one.
Figure 1 Model of Self-World interaction. Each (set of) arrow(s) represents one of the six aspects of existential anxiety.

While not exhaustive, Figure 1 is a graphical summary of the different relationships that are of importance in EA. The set of arrows within the circle refers to the relationship between different aspects of the self, that was described in section 2.3.4. The five other arrows in the figure reflect the five ultimate concerns that we described in section 2.3.3 – anxiety related to death, meaninglessness, guilt, isolation and a subtype of death anxiety, anxiety related to physical threat. We think that these concerns relate to different levels in personal functioning, and that each level is connected to both positive and negative outcomes, which is reflected in the word pairs at the right side of the four arrows. The possibility of both positive and negative outcomes of the different domains is important for the understanding of EA. For example, the anxiety to make wrong choices and experience guilt or regret afterwards is only possible against the background of the experience that it is possible to have an influence on the course of one’s life, and that choosing does make a difference. Feeling meaninglessness is painful precisely because it also is possible to experience life as meaningful, or at least to remember or imagine the possibility of meaningfulness.

In line with the thinking of Yalom and TMT research, the positive outcomes on all levels can also be seen as a protection against EA in general, and especially death anxiety. Not feeling connected to other people can possibly feel, not only dreadful, but also more vulnerable.
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towards the possibility of one’s life ending. On the positive side, close companionship offers shelter and protection against this aspect of life. We see death anxiety in its most typical form as a special example of EA, the anxiety that is connected to the finiteness of one’s own life. As such, in Figure 1, death appears along on the right vertical axis and encompasses all other concerns. This finiteness is an aspect of the time-dimension of life, depicted in Figure 1 as the lower horizontal axis which affects the entire model. As we cannot avoid the moment of our own death, we are also forced to live according to the rules of time. We cannot travel back to moments in our own history, or move forward by our will to the future.

We do not want to suggest that death anxiety is the core threat from which all other anxieties receive their meaning, but yet we want to stress its special place. Death anxiety has a more abstract and all-encompassing character than the other forms of EA. While all of these other forms are related to a positive aspect of life, the positive side to death is life itself. Death forms a threat to existence as a whole, and all aspects of it. For example, when feeling isolated from other persons, it is still possible to lead a meaningful life or to feel safe on a physical level. But with death, all these possibilities come to an end. Death anxiety is also a threat to the relatedness within a person and his perspective on the world. Even when greatly disturbed, people still experience the world from a first person perspective, as discussed in Section 2.3.4, but this perspective is ultimately threatened by the finitude of life.

All of the concerns of our model can be seen as sharing characteristics of the innate person and of the world. We used a dashed line around the different aspects of the self to indicate that we see the transition between the self and world as fluid. A comparison can be made with the exchange that takes place between an organism and its surroundings at a physical level. For example, oxygen is part of the atmosphere, but can also enter the body and interact with its physiologically. Similarly, at a mental level, one’s social encounters are simultaneously outside of the self and also inside, as mental representations, memories and expectations. Neglecting this strong interrelatedness between one’s inner and outer worlds leads to simplifications, such as the description of one’s ultimate concerns as external objects or belief that one’s feelings are caused by certain events.

Of course, our model is a limited description of the richness and diversity of the human encounter with the givens of life. In our introduction to this chapter, we already mentioned that we would leave aside the positive side of existential experiences, and this is perhaps one of the most important limitations of our model. In its current form, it looks quite deterministic and does not show that people are often able to transcend their own individual perspective and experience the world from a broader point-of-view, for example, through the use of creative
imagination or by committing oneself to an altruistic attitude. People also find hope and meaning in spiritual traditions in which a deeper meaning is given to what happens in their lives along with a connection with higher powers. Often death is not described as the ending of one’s life, but as a source of new possibilities. However, we think that our model clearly and concisely shows that EA can be understood on different levels and that these levels are strongly interconnected.

References


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