

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL MOTIVATION AND DEPRESSION

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The aim of this research was to examine the relationship between depression and existential motivation. The Test of Existential Motivation (TEM - Längle & Eckhardt 2000) was used in this study. The psychometric characteristics of the test had been checked and they were found to be good. The test consists of four subtests corresponding to the four existential motivations – man's relationship with the world, it's reality and possibilities; life, the present relationships and feelings; being oneself as a unique, autonomous person; and meaning – circumstances and activities, enabling one to seek perfection. It was found that depressed people's existential motivation is lower than that of those without this diagnosis – statistically significant differences in assessment of the subtests and the entire test were found.

**KEYWORDS:** depression, existential motivation, Test of Existential Motivation (TEM), psychometric characteristics

DIE BEZIEHUNG ZWISCHEN EXISTENTIELLER MOTIVATION UND DEPRESSION

Das Ziel dieser Forschung war die Beziehung zwischen existentieller Motivation und Depression zu untersuchen. Dazu wurde der Test für Existentielle Motivation (TEM - Längle & Eckhardt 2000) verwendet. Die psychometrischen Charakteristika dieses Tests wurden überprüft und für gut befunden. Der Test besteht aus vier Subtests, die vier existentielle Motivationen messen – die Beziehung des Menschen zur Welt, ihrer Realität und Möglichkeiten; Leben, die präsenten Beziehungen und Gefühle; sich selbst sein als einmalige und autonome Person; und Sinn – Bedingungen und Aktivitäten, in denen man nach Vollendung suchen kann. Es wurde gefunden, dass die existentielle Motivation depressiver Menschen geringer ist als für Menschen ohne diese Diagnose. Die Unterschiede in der Bewertung der Subtests und des Gesamttests erwiesen sich als statistisch signifikant.

**SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:** Depression, Existentielle Motivation, Test der Existentiellen Motivation (TEM), psychometrische Charakteristika

## INTRODUCTION

### Importance of analyzing depression and associated existential factors

Depression is a severe and chronic illness tending to a high risk of relapse (Han & Wang 2005) and suicide (Joiner et al. 2004; Meehl 1973). It was also found that depressed people are most likely to commit suicide at the periods of remission (Joiner et al. 2004; Meehl 1973; Dembinskas 2003).

V. E. Frankl (2008/1946) stated, that during the periods of remission of depression, a relatively recovered person becomes obsessed with reflections on the meaning of life. Thus, we may assume that one of the reasons why the relatively healthy periods have tendency towards a high risk of relapse and suicide may be that at these periods people raise many questions about their illness, it's meaning, the meaning of life, human existence in the world or their own personalities. If during these subtle moments people cannot find answers to the essential questions, they may get depressed again or even commit suicide. Thus, it is worth to explore depression from existential perspective, to study the relationship between depression and the meaning of life as well as other existential factors.

### Existential perspective on depression

Existential perspective on depression is an attempt to describe depressed person's phenomenological world, understand person's perception of the world (Arieti & Bemporad 1978). Numerous studies have been made exploring person's phenomenological world and factors, associated with depression. One of these factors is a lack of authenticity – in existential perspective depression is understood

as a sense of “nonbeing”, arising from inability to live authentically (Bootzin & Acocella 1984). I. D. Yalom (1980) also stated that depression may be associated with the lack of responsibility – inability to realize, that person creates his destiny, feelings and suffering himself. Moreover, depression is associated with helplessness – Yalom explained depression, using „learned helplessness“ model, which posits that depression can be caused by human disbelief, that he is responsible for what is going on in his life (Yalom 1980). Existentialists also associate depression with the meaning – it was found in the studies, that depression is negatively correlated with the meaning of life (Crumbaugh & Maholick 1964; Mascaro & Rosen 2008). Thus, in existential perspective, depression was examined and attributed to various factors – autonomy, responsibility, helplessness, meaning and other. However, relationship between depression and existential motivation has been little examined.

### The concept of existential motivation

The concept of existential motivation was suggested by A. Längle (2003a). It is defined as “a process in dialogical movement from the present, given reality towards the person's goals and intentions” (Längle 2003a). In this process, one must experience the dialogical interaction with the four cornerstones of existence: *the world*, its realities and opportunities; *life* with its network of relationships and feelings; *being oneself* as a unique, independent person; and after these tasks are committed, the person is open to experience the dialogical interaction with the fourth cornerstone of existence – *meaning* (Längle 2003a).

It is important to consider the following four corners-

tones of existence. The *first* cornerstone of existence encompasses a man's relationship with the world, his environment and opportunities – his ability to deal with his presence in the world, to claim his place in the world in the given conditions and having available possibilities, as well as his ability to understand his being in the world. A person also has to accept what is positive and endure what is negative – he has to accept what he cannot change. Thus a person confronts with the *second* cornerstone of existence – life, his attitude towards the relationships and emotions, also the main question of life – if a person likes being alive. Thus the person's decision to actively participate is necessary. It is important for a person to find the dialogical interaction with other people, when he moves towards others, has intimate feelings or starts a relationship. The *third* cornerstone of existence involves being oneself – person's attitude towards the uniqueness and conscience, his individuality, diversity and originality. Here the main question of being a personality is raised about a person's right to be what he is and behave the way he behaves now. Thus, the third existential motivation is concerned with persons' need for individuality, his ability to forgive himself and others, his need to be evaluated and ability to evaluate others. The *fourth* cornerstone of existence deals with the meaning and recognition of what person's life is all about. Yet it is not enough just to be in the world and find oneself. Basically, people have to transcend themselves, to be productive and find the fullness of their lives. The meaning lies in not expecting something from life, but finding what life wants from the person, what this moment demands from a man (Längle 2003a).

Thus existence demands continuous confrontation and dialogical exchange with these four aspects. These four realities challenge a man to answer the questions and ask for his inner agreement. They not only demand person's strength, but lead his existence forward (Längle 2003b). Therefore the study of relationship between depression and existential motivation could help us understand person's illness, his feelings, his dialogical interaction with the world, his relationships, himself and the meaning of his life. Thus the aim of this research work is to compare the existential motivation of the depressed in-patients with that of the people without this diagnosis, and examine how these cornerstones of existence are related to depression.

## METHODOLOGY

### Test of Existential Motivation

The Test of Existential Motivation (TEM), created by Längle and Eckhardt (2000), has been used in this research. It was created on the basis of four main personal-existential motivations:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Existential motivation: to be in the world – to be able: I am – can I be?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Existential motivation: to live – to like: I live – do I love my life?
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Existential motivation: to be oneself – to be able: I am the way I am – can I be myself?
- 4<sup>th</sup> Existential motivation: meaningful living: I live – has my life meaning to anybody?

The Test of Existential Motivation consists of 56 questions and each 14 of them are based on the four basic existential motivations.

This test was translated to Lithuanian language by a professional translator, then back translation was made, then it was reexamined by a professional psychologist together with the translator. Also, as psychometric characteristics of the Lithuanian version of test have never been studied, one of the aims of the study was to examine psychometric characteristics of the test.

### Participants

66 participants were involved in the study of psychometric characteristics. The study of relationship between existential motivation and depression involved 64 subjects – 32 patients with depression and 32 subjects without diagnosis of depression. There were 6 males and 26 females in both groups; their age was 21 – 63. Mean age of the first group was 46,2, and the standard deviation 11,7; mean age of the second group was 44,7 and the standard deviation 11. In-patients with depression were investigated in day hospital departments of Vilnius Vasaros Hospital, a psychiatric branch of Republican Klaipėda Hospital and Šiauliai Republican psychiatric hospital. The control group subjects without diagnosis of depression, has been chosen so as to match the experimental group by age, gender and education.

## RESULTS

### Psychometric characteristics of the Test of Existential Motivation

After the first part of the research was completed it was found that psychometric characteristics of the test are high – test-retest reliability  $R = 0,943$  and internal consistency measured by Cronbach's alpha was 0,951.

### Relationship between depression and existential motivation

Existential motivation	Means of the first group	Means of the second group	p value
First existential motivation	26,6	43,8	0,000*
Second existential motivation	35,2	48,4	0,000*
Third existential motivation	29,7	43,4	0,000*
Fourth existential motivation	29,6	43,4	0,000*
Basic existential motivation	121,1	180,6	0,000*
* - the difference between two groups is statistically significant, when $p < 0,05$			

Tab. 1: Comparison of those, who suffer from depression and those without diagnosis scores of the TEM.

It was found that depressed people have lower existential motivation than people without this diagnosis – statistically significant differences in subtests and the entire test were

found ( $p$  - value - 0,000). The results are represented in the Table 1.

## DISCUSSION

According to the results on the psychometric characteristics, the test can be used in further studies, and all the results are reliable.

It was also found that depressed people have the first existential motivation in TEM (encompassing the world, its realities and opportunities) lower than people without this diagnosis (see Table 1). Based on the results we can assume that depressed people's relationship with the world is disturbed – they cannot find their place in the world, life seems unsafe for them; furthermore they feel disappointed and insecure. Also, their existing conditions are not acceptable to them and they do not see their opportunities. Depressed people's first existential motivation may be lower for several reasons.

The lack of dialogical relationship between the person and the world may be related to depression – depressed people cannot accept their living conditions, and – they cannot create their own conditions as well. However, accepting existing conditions, a person can gain strength to live with what is inevitable. Also, as V. E. Frankl (2008/1946) stated, acceptance of depression is the first step in the psychotherapy of depression – person has to accept depression as endogenous and patiently bear his mental illness, realizing that inability to see his values and meaning of life is a consequence of his depression. Another reason why depressed people's first existential motivation is lower may be their inability to see possibilities. A depressed person feels helpless, worthless, and it seems to him impossible to reach his goal in life (Frankl 2008/1946). As a result, he does not pursue available opportunities and as it is stated in the „learned helplessness“ model, he cannot accept that he is responsible for what is going on in his life (Yalom 1980). However Yalom emphasized the significance of taking responsibility and finding available possibilities, arguing that a person is confronted with difficulties, but each one is responsible for what he is doing with handicaps, for his attitude to difficulties. Moreover, a person always has the opportunity to take spiritual attitude towards the inevitable suffering (Frankl 1997).

It was also found that depressed people have the second existential motivation in TEM (encompassing life with its network of relationships and feelings) lower than those without this diagnosis (see Table 1). People with depression rate their lives, existing relationships and emotions as much worse. They do not like their living, and grieve that so few things delight them. Life is a burden and suffering for them, and they do not feel that they are good for anything. Depressed people's relationship with other people is also disturbed – they do not feel loved by others, do not feel amiability that other people show them.

One of the reasons why depressed people's second existential motivation is lower may be the lack of dialogical relationship with others. Depressed people may not have such a relationship in which they could experience reciprocity, where they could receive and give. Thus, depressed people may encounter difficulties in taking responsibility and esta-

blishing relationships with others. Moreover, as V. E. Frankl (2008/1946) stated, in the case of endogenous depression, person feels the distance between his personality and the ideal, he feels disability to reach his goals and experiences the feeling of inferiority. We can assume that such a feeling of helplessness discourages people's turning towards others. Also, a person who suffers from endogenous depression decries not only himself, but also the world at large, he abhors not only himself, but also others (Frankl 2008/1946). Furthermore, a person who suffers from depression, while being unable to establish a mutual relationship with others, may face an existential loneliness, which is defined as an insurmountable chasm between himself and other beings, as well as human separation from the world (Yalom 1980). In the existential perspective this loneliness is seen as one of the factors associated with depression – it is stated that it is hard for people to accept loneliness, and this may be one of the causes of depression (Bootzin & Acocella 1984). However, only when a person gets to know his loneliness and is able to accept it, he can turn to others and accept them (Yalom 1980).

Depressed people have the third existential motivation in TEM (encompassing being oneself) lower than those without this diagnosis (see Table 1). The depressed people underestimate themselves, their individuality, personality and diversity more than people without the diagnosis. They assess other people opinion about themselves as much worse – they do not think others value and accept them. They often feel shame, they cannot respect themselves and do not value themselves for their works. We can assume that depressed people's relationship with themselves, their uniqueness is impaired, and they may not be aware or less aware of their independence, a sense that they are the masters of their own existence.

It is important to note that person's dialogical relationship with existential motivation is essential. Person who suffers from depression may not have what is important for him, but despite this, he has some opportunities. First of all, he can recognize and evaluate himself; he can allow himself to be the way he is. He can find the reasons why he can respect himself and discover his authenticity. What is important is that even if person cannot find what he can respect himself for, he can respect himself for the fact that he is enduring his illness – we can even say that endure – is also a kind of „merit“, if endurance is inevitable (Frankl 2008/1946). When a person discovers what he can appreciate himself for, he can begin to respect himself and be more active in discovering his identity.

Estimates of the forth subtest (encompassing meaning) also differed significantly in the two study groups (see Table 1). It was found that depressed people appreciate their meaning of life much less than people without this diagnosis. Depressed people do not see improvement in their lives, they feel that most of what they were doing, they never wanted to do and do not feel that their work makes them feel alive. Depressed people also see their life as meaningless and empty and do not know what their life should be like. They do not feel that there is a place where they can be productive and do not see themselves in the larger context, which could provide the structure of their lives.

We can assume that depressed people feel less meaning of life, because they do not believe that not only they can require something out of life, but life can also demand something from them. According to V. E. Frankl (2008/1946), a human being means being a conscious and responsible being, who takes every life situation like a challenge and acknowledges that not one has to ask, what is the meaning of his life, but that he has been asked this question. Depressed people may have difficulties understanding what is expected from them in their life situations. Therefore, one of the steps that can help a depressed person to find the meaning of life – is to help him accept his difficulties and feelings as tasks and links to what a person should understand and do in his living situation. There are several approaches in existential perspective, what depression requires of person. It is alleged that, in particular, person suffering from depression has to accept his illness, to take a spiritual attitude towards the illness and to discover its meaning (Elmer 2006). He also has to understand that life is something more than depression and a person can transcend it (van Deurzen 2002). Also, depression can help a person to find out that he has a meaning and purpose in life (Elmer 2006). And a man's task is not to deny the troubles, but to understand their meaning and gain strength to live constructively with them (van Deurzen 2002). Thus, depressed person, who discovered what is required by his illness may find its meaning and endure it. The results of this study show, that depressed people's existential motivation is lower than of those without this diagnosis. We can assume that depressed person's moving from the present given reality towards his goals and intentions is disturbed and depressed person may lack dialogical interaction with the cornerstones of existence. A person may find it difficult to understand that not only the world, the life, uniqueness and meaning must be given to him, but he is responsible and has opportunities to give to these cornerstones of existence. A man also always has the opportunity to accept what he cannot change. And when he accepts the existing conditions, he can see the opportunities available and experience his existence moving forward (Längle 2003b). These insights could be used in the therapeutic work, trying to understand the depressed person's relationship with the existential motivation, helping him to accept the inevitable conditions, discover the opportunities and help him establish a dialogical relationship with the world, life, relationships, self, and the meaning of life.

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