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### **Existential wellbeing counseling.**

*Abstract:*

Existential wellbeing counseling emphasizes the interdependent nature of physical, social, personal and spiritual aspects of human experience. It implies a choice to look at symptoms as wake-up calls for realizing the full potential of human life. Through an experiential process of strength awareness and focusing on resources, clients are encouraged to address differentiated sources of wellbeing. This is an experiential way to create a shift from problems and limitations to opportunities and possibilities and to imply the ‘moving forward’ tendency of the organism. By including all the dimensions of human existence, counseling can be inspired and transformed from merely curing to healing. It results in an enhanced wellbeing, characterized by love as the cornerstone virtue.

### **Searching for existential wellbeing: Essential principles**

Before explaining something about existential wellbeing counseling, I invite you to bring your attention in the middle of your body, waiting in a friendly welcoming attitude, asking yourself these questions:

What gives you strength or courage in your life?

What are you striving for in your life?

To whom, or what, do you most freely express love?

When have you felt most deeply and fully alive?

For what are you deeply grateful?

What are the experiences which changed your life?

What are moments which you found extremely difficult or which you regret?

What gives you the feeling that you are making the best of life?

How would you like people to remember you when you are gone?

These questions hint at resources, destinations, struggles and transformations in life (Pargament, 2007). With similar questions counselors can guide clients in order to explore what someone's sensitivities are on the level of existential wellbeing. The *starting point of existential wellbeing counseling is experiential*: focusing on the bodily felt meaning. The counselor offers different questions to evoke the theme in a personal way. Focusing invitations are continually interwoven in the narrative or the autobiographic story of the client.

This way of working goes hand in hand with a process oriented use of *Positive psychology*. It leads to a strength centered approach, with special attention on development of virtues favoring the art of living. Taking seriously the contributions of resources and strengths alongside traumas and vulnerabilities, is a paradigmatic shift in psychotherapy. Existential wellbeing counseling should not be understood as a call to ignore negative aspects of human experience. But rather how positive and negative experiences may be interrelated, how they depend on each other and work together. To quote Gendlin (1978) "Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness" (p. 75).

The questions given above dig deeper than is usually the goal in Positive psychology. The founding father of positive psychology Seligman (2002) holds in his Authentic Happiness theory that there are three distinct kinds of happiness. First the Pleasant Life, consisting in having as many pleasures as possible and developing the skills to amplify the pleasures. Second, the Good Life, which consists in knowing what your signature strengths are, and then recrafting your work, love, friendship, leisure and parenting to use those strengths to have more flow in life. Third, the Meaningful Life, which consists of using your signature strengths in the service of something that you believe is larger than you are. Concerning these criteria, a very challenging statement comes from the psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1946/1963) after his survival of the war concentration camps. In his view, finding meaning in life is the most urgent need of human beings, especially when basic needs are not fulfilled. This seems in contradiction to Maslow's (1962) influential theory of a hierarchy of human needs. In that framework the needs for food and shelter, and social support are elementary before some of the 'being values' as beauty, goodness, truth and love come in the picture. Discussions on

values belong traditionally to religion and philosophy. In a secularized and multicultural world, we can no more rely on the same basic beliefs for everyone. That's why existential wellbeing counseling embraces *different traditions of psychological theory and perennial spiritual wisdom* and hands many methods for development and healing. This results in a very broad and varied background to inspire the exploration of different existential themes.

Counseling in existential wellbeing takes the perspective of the complexity of human existence, recognizing human's physical, social, personal and spiritual reality (van Deurzen, 1997, 2009; Leijssen, 2007). It has a vision of authentic living as *awareness of different dimensions of human existence*. Existential wellbeing implies sufficient attention for each dimension, not too much, not too little. This framework guides the counselor in exploring strengths and vulnerabilities. In further paragraphs it will be illustrated how focusing on the bodily felt meaning brings people in contact with one's original deep concern for healing and transformation, and the interwoven reality of physical, social, personal and spiritual experiences.

Attitudes and skills of the existential wellbeing counselor are inspired from *different therapeutic approaches* as well (Ward & Reuter, 2011). However foundations are interpersonal and relational strengths from the *person-centered* approach: empathy, authenticity, acceptance, appreciation of diversity (Thorne & Lambers, 1998). Diverse forms of expression are facilitated: language, music, movement, art, poetry, clips from the internet... There is encouragement to develop imagination and creativity, humor is welcomed, and last but not least: the quality test lies in real life, in the practice of the principles in daily life and work.

## **Dimensions of human existence**

Human beings seem to develop from a preoccupation with physical survival, through learning how to live with others, to discovering individuality, and ultimately to experiencing connectedness to a self-transcending process. These four dimensions of human existence: the physical, social, personal and spiritual, are echoed in many developmental theories and in different faith traditions (van Deurzen, 1997).

The *physical* dimension deals with the material world, the physical body, everything that is given in nature. Safety, comfort, physical health and beauty are important values in this

dimension. Threats are: poverty, pain, sickness, bodily decay and death. The experience of the ‘physical self’ is largely determined by ‘having’ material things, actions out of physical abilities, enjoying beauty of nature.

In the *social* dimension importance is given to one’s place in society. Esteem, recognition and success are considered important values, but also caring for others, responsibilities, friendships and belonging to a group. Threats are: condemnation, rejection, loneliness, guilt and shame. From the ‘social self’ people speak of ‘having to do’ for others and they are concerned about the way others look at them. The ‘social self’ enjoys good company and finds satisfaction in doing good for others. Belonging to a group of people gives meaning to one’s life.

The *personal* dimension deals with psychological characteristics, character traits and coping skills to respond to the challenges of life. Self-knowledge, creativity, autonomy, freedom, an internal locus of control and a rich inner life, procure much satisfaction. Threats are: confusion, doubt, imperfection, limitation of freedom, and disintegration. The tendency to self-actualization from the ‘personal self’ is formulated in terms of ‘willing’ and in development of personal skills and talents. Meaning comes from finding truth and wisdom about oneself and the universe.

The *spiritual* level deals with self-transcending ideals, ultimate meaning of life, one’s connectedness to the universe. Threats are: meaninglessness of life, futility and evil. On this level the person feels grateful for what is given in life. Circumstances – also difficulties - are seen as invitations for spiritual growth, and synchronicity becomes meaningful. It is not so much about 'choice' but about 'surrender'. The fear that ego interests may be threatened, makes place for trust in a greater self-transcending purpose. People feel touched by the mystery. The consciousness of unity of everything characterizes the level of the ‘self-transcendent self’. It is the realm of the soul, the awareness of a force that transcends the material aspects of life. As the physician Albert Schweitzer (1947) maintained: "Man can no longer live for himself alone. We realize that all life is valuable, and that we are united to this life. From this knowledge comes our spiritual relationship to the universe."

In any particular culture, or for one particular, one of these dimensions can be particularly salient. Change in any domain can lead to knock-on changes in the others. For example, a person who becomes paralyzed after a brain damage, may face a destiny of being dependent on others and losing his or her autonomy. The resulting crisis can trigger the spiritual

dimension. In fact the dimensions are always interwoven, like the organs in an organism depend on each other and work together for a healthy functioning.

Existential wellbeing counseling addresses each dimension and gives special attention to resources that are neglected by the person. A healing process includes the physical, social and personal dimensions over time, while the ultimate healing seems to come from an opening up to the spiritual dimension, a resource beyond that of our own will, the contact with one's soul and the soul in everything.

A small **vignette from a counseling session** can make more concrete how to address different dimensions of human existence. Performance anxiety brings a young woman to counseling. Whenever she is asked to sing and play music in public, her voice is blocked and her hands start shaking so badly that she is no longer able to play.

We explore how in her self-experience she locks herself up in the physical dimension when she starts fearing that her hands will not be able to find the right keys. She tried already for a long time to pay attention to a healthy way of breathing, a discipline of sleeping enough, no smoking, drinking herbal teas to support her voice. Also she cultivates making space for daily walking in nature.

In the social dimension she recognizes that during her childhood, playing music was her way of having a relationship with her grandmother who was a musician as well. There was a time that she had a special place in every social event because with her singing she was recognized as the entertainer of the group. Actually she has no need whatsoever for the admiration of an audience. Also the client seems to have forgotten that she likes the connection with friends, especially the joy of playing music together.

In the personal dimension she experiences music as a game in which she can fully indulge when she is alone. It is an important source of satisfaction. It is also a successful coping strategy to stop her ruminating thoughts. She recognizes how important it was for her to develop her identity as a musician. She felt special by emphasizing her exceptional talent and creativity in music.

A dramatic change occurs when she is invited to ask inside her body how it feels if she imagines that she 'may' play music and share this universal language, instead of thinking from an ego level of 'having to' perform and 'willing to prove' her skills for an audience.

From the spiritual perspective she experiences her talent as a divine gift and the beauty of music fills her with gratitude.

A week after this session, she reports about a performance during which she had imagined that her ‘self-transcendent self’ was playing and singing through her. This performance had become a peak experience during which the audience no longer appeared to be a critical judging ear, but a supporting presence. Ever since that moment, her performance anxiety has completely disappeared. She could make a crucial perceptual and emotional shift by which she could see and experience her performance anxiety through the lens of the physical, social, personal, and finally spiritual dimension.

With the help of the following *experiential exercise* people have an opportunity to explore the theme of different dimensions of existence in a personal way. It creates the possibility to find ‘your place’ within each dimension. This exercise starts – as always - with: friendly and welcoming attention in the middle of your body, giving yourself good company and listening, the same as you would give support and empathy to your best friend.

1. Visualize your life as it is for the present time and ask yourself the question: “Who am I?” Take notice of all possible answers that pop into you. Repeat the sentence “I am...” with several statements. You should have at least ten statements that say something about you or what you feel like to identify with.
2. Explore your life further on with the question: “In what do I invest my time, my energy, my money?” Note at least five answers specific for your ‘investments’.
3. Another question to probe the theme is: “About what am I worrying?” Write down about five of your habitual worries.
4. Write down also five answers to the question: “What procures me pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, joy?”

Now you can fill in your answers in one of the four dimensions. Some answers may fit in several dimensions at the same time. Which dimension is most prominent for you? Which one remains perhaps empty?

The following scheme gives an overview of possible answers to the questions, relating them to the different dimensions of human existence.

Dimensions of Human Existence  
(Leijssen, 2007; van Deurzen, 2009)

	<b>Physical</b> ‘Umwelt’	<b>Social</b> ‘Mitwelt’	<b>Personal</b> ‘Eigenwelt’	<b>Spiritual</b> ‘Überwelt’
<b>I AM ...</b>  Deals with	Body  Material world  Nature	Place in society  Relations	Identity  Character traits  Thinking  Feeling	Soul  Meaning  Self-transcending ideals
<b>ENERGY, time money</b>  Values	Health  Safety  Comfort	Esteem  Success  Connection	Autonomy  Freedom  Knowledge  Authenticity	A better world,  Consciousness of unity  ‘Being values’
<b>WORRIES</b>  Threats	Pain, sickness  Death  Poverty	Rejection  Loneliness  Guilt  Shame	Confusion  Doubt  Imperfection	Meaninglessness  Futility  Evil
<b>JOY</b>  Perennial philosophy	BEAUTY	GOODNESS	TRUTH	LOVE

To feel as fully human implies the recognition of the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimension. Existential wellbeing counseling addresses each dimension. One of the ways of approaching the richness of human existence is to pay attention to a specific virtue from the perspective of a physical, social, personal and spiritual reality.

### **Virtues, strengths, talents, positive emotions**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) summarize all there is to know about twenty-four strengths, classifying them under six virtues that consistently emerge across history and culture:

wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Virtues are core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers; perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence.

Character strengths are the psychological ingredients to displaying the virtues. Positive psychology relies on empirical research of strengths to understand human functioning. It holds promise for fostering health and wellbeing as well as repairing and healing wounds.

Snyder, Lopez and Pedrotti (2011, p.67) define strength as “a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes”.

Talents are “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied and manifested in life experiences characterized by yearnings, rapid learning, satisfaction, and timelessness.” Talents are considered as trait-like raw materials to be the products of healthy development. Strengths can be viewed as extensions of talents. The strength construct combines talent with associated knowledge and skills.

In existential wellbeing counseling we pay attention to the meanings and current explanations of specific virtues and strengths, measurements, development across the life span, consequences and expressions in art and poetry in different cultures. But most of all we focus on the personal meaning for this person and the contribution to existential wellbeing. What for one person can be a strength he/she chooses to learn and exercise in his/her life - for instance kindness - can be for another person a natural talent that develops and flourishes in good circumstances. In order to enhance existential wellbeing it is important that strengths or talents are connected to positive emotions.

Experiments have documented that positive emotions - especially joy - make thought patterns more flexible, creative, integrative and efficient; while negative emotions narrow attention.

Negative emotions serve individual survival; while positive emotions are more expansive and help people to broaden and build and “to break out of the ego cage of I and mine, and free the self from the self” – the argument for Vaillant (2007) to connect spirituality to eight positive emotions: love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, trust, gratitude and awe.

In existential wellbeing counseling we pay attention to different strengths and their applications. An exploration in a framework of physical, social, personal, spiritual aspects, offers opportunities to develop them further and use them in new ways. As an illustration I will describe ‘love’, the powerful virtue that contains necessary strengths for growth and healing.

## **Love: the cornerstone virtue of human life**

*“The ability of human beings to form loving bonds is possibly one of their greatest strengths”*  
(Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003).

At first: an experiential ***exercise to situate yourself in an ‘existential landscape of love’.***

Take your time to sit comfortable and bring your awareness in your body. When you feel ready, you can give yourself this general invitation: “How am I about the issue of love?” You wait in silence, just keep on sensing in your body and remaining aware on anything in response to your invitation. You might find a few words, an image, a sound, a movement.... Whatever that pops up is welcomed. You can stay with ‘it’ and after a while you may offer your expressions back to your body – paying special attention to your heart region, stomach and abdomen. Sense for what descriptions or expressions would fit best for what comes up into you in relation to the issue of love. No matter what you have found, for this time, just receive. (Later you might tell to someone what happened, let your body re-experience, and develop it further as feels appropriate).

Now we continue with exploring different ways ‘love’ can manifest to you. Do not give in of a tendency to judge, right or wrong. Watch with acceptance what really presents to you. Rate yourself with each item on a scale: from 0 (nonexistent for you) to 5 (dominantly present). When you make the sum of your score of the 7 items of each dimension, you will have an indication about expressions of love in different existential dimensions of your life. For each dimension the maximum score is (7x5=) 35. A high or low score is not ‘good’ or ‘bad’. It is just a way of noticing: “*it is what it is*” as “*love says*” in the poem of Erich Fried (1921-1988).

*Physical level:* Love as vital force.

1. I enjoy tasty food and/or good sex and/or physical activities and/or sensorial excitement.
2. I care for my health.
3. I care for material things needed for living.

4. I appreciate beautiful objects and/or physical comfort.
5. Rhythm and beauty of nature has a hold on me.
6. I care for the environment.
7. I feel one with nature.

*Social level:* Love as compassion.

1. I behave in a friendly way with one and all.
2. I do invest in others.
3. I mainly tend to see the good in others.
4. I like to care for others and find pleasure in helping them.
5. I accomplish my social duties in a loving way.
6. I love to be in the company of others.
7. I feel part of humanity.

*Personal level:* Love as positive feelings.

1. I foster positive feelings and ideas.
2. About my work I can say: "This procures me joy."
3. I know and accept myself as I am.
4. I create possibilities to learn and to develop.
5. I give myself time for leisure.
6. I feel gratitude for what is.
7. I foster my precious inner core.

*Spiritual level:* Love as being.

1. I give without expectation of any return.
2. I want to contribute to a better world for one and all.
3. I show respect for everything around me
4. I experience a realm of inner peace.
5. I feel inspired and tend to radiate it.
6. I have deep feelings of oneness with all that exists.
7. To love is my real being.

The history of love highlights four traditions, denoted by Greek terms: (1) Eros: search for the beautiful; (2) Philia: affection in friendship; (3) Nomos: obedience to the divine; (4) Agape: self-transcended love. In Sternberg's theory (1986) all types of love are made up of different combinations of these three components: (1) Passion, or physical attractiveness and romantic drives; (2) Intimacy, or feelings of closeness and connectedness; (3) Commitment, involving the decision to initiate and sustain a relationship.

In existential wellbeing counseling 'love' is conceptualized as a 'connecting' virtue that can find expression in many strengths in the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimension. Something or some-one receives its special value because of the love some-one gives to it or receives from it. This makes love the meaning giving process by excellence. In the following paragraphs a few topics of ***Love as connection*** will be highlighted in the framework of the four existential dimensions.

1. Love in the ***physical dimension*** is about vital connection to the body, nature and the material environment.

Love as a strength expressed in the physical dimension is basic, yet at the same time prone to misinterpretation. For many, love in the physical dimension is automatically associated with sex. Sexuality is a vital energy that we can enjoy and through which we're physically

attracted to be connected. In existential wellbeing counseling this means a respectful acknowledgement of people as sexual beings; making room for the discovery of masculinity and femininity; having the possibility to explore what those physical impulses could mean; how to enjoy these and also how to limit destructive behavior.

Connecting in the physical dimension can result in joy, pleasure, lust, solace, security, comfort. Much broader than just sexuality it means recognizing and enjoying the physical being, in all its components. Educators communicate love for the physical dimension of human existence in the way they deal with the natural needs of a child. Starting with food, diapering, sleep. Quite literally, if educators cannot connect in a loving way with the physical aspects, even perhaps express some fear or disgust, something at the level of the vitality or the love for the body and its natural needs will be disturbed in the child. If the connection is healthy, then loving respect for the body shows up in enjoying delicious food, paying attention to a healthy diet, physical activity tailored to one's capacities, comfortable clothing appropriate for the circumstances. Physical challenges to push certain comfort zones are undertaken and beauty becomes a source of meaning demonstrated either in the natural or in the material world.

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) points to 'Vitality' as notable strength involving: Zest, Enthusiasm, Vigor, Energy (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The feedback of the scale says: "You approach life with excitement and energy. You feel alive and activated" ([www.psych.upenn.edu/seligman/classification.htm](http://www.psych.upenn.edu/seligman/classification.htm)).

Matter can also be an expression of loving intentions. Respectful tuning in to someone's needs shows up, at a basic level, in the attention for the material dimension of the environment. Personally I was pleasantly struck by the appearance of a hospital in Bangalore, India. The entrance hall was a large round space giving a sense of openness and beauty but also security, even embrace. The visibility of symbols of various religions was remarkable, as it communicated instantly the multicultural attention.

In the context of love in the physical dimension, I also want to mention the impact of physical contact. Usually touching is avoided in counseling because of its sexual connotations. And rightly so: counselors are considerate in the use of physical contact. But it would be a pity if this powerful form of expression would become a taboo or be banished. Our intuitive sense of the supportive and healing power of physical contact, is firmly underpinned by research (Leijssen, 2006). In moments of crisis, for instance, direct physical contact is what offers most

containment and the quickest sense of security, redirection and control over the situation. There is also evidence that people who haven't been touched enough in a nonsexual way, are struggling to appreciate themselves and to accept their body. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that premature babies experience less stress hormones when touched in a loving way than when they're in optimal incubator conditions. Hard facts about the power of a gentle loving approach in the physical dimension.

And last but not least: the process of bringing loving attention in the body creates the condition for a more subtle and refined level of perception in the person – the gateway to experiencing the inner wisdom. From there on the focusing process can start. However for many persons the loving attitude is not obvious, because they learned something different from their social interactions.

## 2. Love in the *social dimension* is about authentic interpersonal connection.

*"It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us; it is the good people who happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age."* (Vaillant, 2002, p.13)

Love in the social dimension deals with attachment and bonding, empathy and compassion, flourishing relationships, intimacy, friendship, altruism, caregiving, service, responsibility. Just a few accents from this abundance. Studies of successful aging (Snyder, Lopez, Pedrotti, 2011) reveal that social support is most potent when it is mutual. Support that involves providing friendship and kindness. When love is translated into action it becomes caregiving and service.

Counseling in existential wellbeing encourages people to try '*mini-experiments*' to build a stronger social circle. For instance: "Consider the state of your social network. Draw four concentric circles. In the middle of the circle, write 'Me', and then fill in the remaining circles with names of the people to whom you give your time and talents on regular basis; the closer the names are to the center circle, the closer these people are to you. Consider how you can maintain the people in the circles closest to you and bring other folks closer to you. When you have identified a few strategies, end the exercise by one acting on one of your thoughts and giving your time or talent to someone close to you." (Snyder, Lopez, Pedrotti, 2011, p.112.)

Carl Rogers (1961) formulated the critical ingredients of an authentic connection: acceptance, empathy, and congruence. These attitudes belong to the most evidence based ingredients of a healing relationship. Empathy as the ability to understand what another being is living through, is a crucial social strength. The loving, caring and reassuring words and presence of an empathic listener help people develop and heal. Rogers discovered that when a person truly listens to another the process of growth is set free. One of the effects of this attitude is that the person can bring more awareness to the ongoing experiencing process. Other effects are that the person can relive a situation in the context of a holding relationship. The relationship thus defines how and what is being experienced.

Compassion is about a genuine commitment to assist others in their suffering. This form of love in action implies also a willingness to listen, to look for words or other symbolizations that do not appease suffering but recognize it. The reliable presence of another person who really makes the effort to make contact at the level of the person, especially when there's no 'solution' to the suffering, is one of the most underrated forms of support.

Empathy makes it also possible to address problematic social behavior. Moreover, through the non-judging and accepting interactions with a counselor, the person gets confronted but also gets a deeper insight into patterns of 'getting stuck in relationships' and learns how to behave in a constructive interpersonal exchange.

Yet the social dimension is never free of tension. Empathy in interaction with authenticity means also recognizing differences and confronting conflicts. Authentic connection with others means precisely that there is no pretending – we're not doing as if we were in agreement with others. It is neither 'being silent', nor 'nodding' for the sake of peace! To really connect at an authentic level it is sometimes necessary to thoroughly disagree, to clash, to struggle through difficult conversations in which differences are explained and clarified, so that a real space can emerge where differences can co-exist.

When love becomes associated with work and career, social goals become more meaningful than achievement-oriented goals. The emphasis is in altruism as one of the mature strengths. People become involved in mentoring the next generation and they offer a perspective on the essence of working and living.

The essence of love in a society means: do what you have to do. This means that you choose to connect with the tasks you're responsible for. This implies also asking yourself: what's

really essential? And being able to break free from the social pressure and the delusion of the day. Distancing oneself from social pressure is only possible if the person has a strong inner connection.

### 3. Love in the ***personal dimension*** is about friendly connection to the inner self.

Love for oneself deals with strengths as self-efficacy, self-actualization, optimism, wisdom, creativity, flow. The discovery of one's own will is a turning point in the individuation of a person. A loving environment gives room for the child to experience his/her own uniqueness.

One's identity can be completely snowed under by expectations of others. A society does not realize how much rejection of a person's identity is implicit in collective norms. And when a child does not sufficiently fit those, labels and diagnosis may pop up. As soon as we talk about 'deviation' from what is considered as standard, we're implicitly rejecting the child's uniqueness. Individuals who cannot meet standards and expectations that prevail in their environment, are particularly vulnerable to 'demoralization'.

Demoralization is not about actual facts, it is related to negative feelings. Demoralization occurs when a person continually collides with an inability to respond to a distorted self-image that was constructed mainly based on conditional expectations of others. The confrontation with the inability to sustain this distortion, falters one's belief system. This results in fear, discouragement, shame, anger, sadness, alienation and so forth. Typical for demoralization is that this state has a disastrous effect on a person's problem solving ability and confidence. Not only is the self-love undermined, it may even turn to self-aggression, ranging from self-damage to injury or even suicide. Children try to avert demoralization for a long time by blaming themselves. This way they can maintain the illusion of being in control. Children decide that they themselves fail and therefore they do not deserve the love of others. They decide that they're better off sacrificing their individuality for the sake of peace. In doing so, people lose the connection to their inner self.

The way back is not simple. The word 'person' is rooted in the Latin 'persona', meaning 'mask' (Graste, 2008). The word 'person' covers the set of qualities through which one can recognize oneself as 'this is me'. It's about accomplishments that have become part of the person's development. This constructed self-image is sometimes a successful lie that leads to approval, prestige, avoidance of conflicts. To face the truth about one's self requires effort

and courage. And yet the acquisition of self-knowledge is a crucial initiative to connect with the inner self. ‘Self-acceptance’ is a major evolution in many healing processes. But I prefer the term ‘self-love’ as it is more energizing and invigorating. It is an inner attitude through which anyone can be good company for oneself in any circumstance. Self-love implies that the many outer layers that have built up over time to protect one’s core, are peeled off. This is the essence of self-knowledge: to face the truth about oneself in a loving way, so that it is no longer needed to hide or suppress things. In a gentle attitude of connecting with self, troublesome stuff does not need to be condemned; it rather is a gateway to discover the deeper underlying motives. The belief that the individual has had a good reason to be as he/she has become, can help restore confidence in oneself.

This results in peace of mind because one comes to terms with oneself. It goes along with fostering positive feelings and ideas, no worrying about what is immutable, no endless fretting about deficiencies and shortages. This is not the same as ‘pep talk’ or even superficial positive thinking. It is a deeper feeling of acceptance: life is good the way it is. It is a purification process, where the individual restores contact with the authentic self and treasures the own core essence.

There are many approaches to support self-reflection. Personally, I am convinced that it is not about ‘which method’ would be better. The key lies in with which method you really connect deeply. In other words: do you feel love for your choice? For me it was a turning-point in my life when I discovered Focusing during a workshop with Gendlin (1978). I was formed in an academic environment where the rational approach was dominant. Focusing introduced a new development in my consciousness. I became more alert to what is palpable, alive and relevant, and my self-awareness increased. And, finally, the experience of the living forward tendency touched the transcendent ground of my life. Focusing became a vital doorway to the realm of universal consciousness.

4. Love in the *spiritual dimension* is about felt connection to a larger self-transcendent process.

The focusing process led to me experiencing my soul in a very concrete way (Leijssen, 2009). I would not be surprised if Gendlin (1984) introduced the term “felt sense” to prevent preconceived ideas of religion and spirituality to come to mind when hearing the word

“soul.”. The soul is the life force which can show itself in various experiences (Elkins, 2001). It is an archetype that gives direction and meaning to the individual life. It transcends the limited self through the experience of connectedness to a larger process. So, on the one hand, the soul is tangible as a sort of inner compass, a bodily felt inspiration. On the other hand that inward-oriented movement is inseparably linked to an outward-oriented movement of connectedness with something that transcends the person. These movements go together like the process of breathing in and breathing out.

The additional value of the concept ‘soul’ compared to the concept of ‘person’ is that the soul is connected to a person as well as being trans-personal. It does not stop at the boundaries of the person; it transcends the person. It points to the mystic dimension of human experience. Mysticism is a process through which a connectedness to a larger process is experienced.

Existential wellbeing counseling embraces spiritual development as a means to deliver oneself from negative emotions and egocentricity. Spiritual development deals with generosity, integrity, forgiveness, gratitude, humor, surrender. On an integrative level the spiritual is no longer ‘separated’ from other dimensions. Thus in the physical world the spiritual attitude translates in a greater respect of nature. If the social life gets saturated by the spiritual attitude, goodness becomes self-evident. In the personal dimension a spiritual way of life translates in truth. In the end love is the all-encompassing pre-condition, a pure energy that drives the various forms of life, the inner knowing that we are one with all others. In this place Love, Beauty, Goodness, Truth, Self, Spirit, … are the same.

## Conclusion

Human body, social environment, personality and spirituality exist on the same continuum, and existential wellbeing counseling encompasses the entire continuum. It puts into light the fully potential of man and it looks at the very best in humanity, independent of a specific faith or any religion.

Grounded by theory and research findings counselors can facilitate existential wellbeing by introducing strengths involving positive qualities, thus giving more color and deepening to life. The research based description of ‘Connectedness’ sounds: “People strong in the connectedness theme have faith in links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason” (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2011,

p.41). This supports the experiential knowledge and development we discovered by paying attention to the indescribable virtue of love.

In existential wellbeing counseling the Focusing method is crucial in order to reach beyond only mental knowledge. Compared to direct inner knowledge, theories are but poor substitutes, as distant from the direct experience as a text about sexual reproduction is from experiencing a loving embrace.

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