

# Investigating the effect of existential therapy on feelings of helplessness and failure, feelings of old age and emptiness, and feelings of confusion and conflict in retired teachers

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## Abstract

**Background:** Retirement can cause problems for individuals and lead to symptoms like retirement syndrome, including incompatibility and identity crises.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to investigate the impact of existential therapy on retired teachers' feelings of helplessness and failure, aging and emptiness, and confusion and conflict.

**Methods:** This was a semi-experimental study with a pre-test and post-test design and a control group. The study included all retired teachers in Kermanshah, Iran, and 40 teachers were selected randomly and assigned to either the experimental or control group. Data were collected through the retirement syndrome questionnaire, and statistical analysis was conducted using multivariate covariance analysis.

**Results:** The study found that there were significant differences between the retirement syndrome symptoms in the existential therapy group and the control group, including feelings of helplessness and failure, aging and emptiness, and confusion and conflict. The participants in the experimental group showed a reduction in the mean score of retirement syndrome symptoms after the therapy sessions.

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the positive impact of existential therapy on reducing retirement syndrome symptoms for retired teachers. Training in existential therapy can help individuals prepare for retirement and cope with the challenges that come with it.

**Keywords:** Existential therapy, Existentialism, Helplessness, School teachers, Retirement.

## Introduction

Retirement and old age are related phenomena that overlap with each other in time symmetry.<sup>1</sup> Retirement means passing from another role and moving to a new stage of life, which creates a deep interruption in one's life. Retirement is a sudden end to one's working life.<sup>2,3</sup> This stage occurs while work has a central concept for many people in self-definition, identity, purposefulness, time structure, social communication, and social participation, and it affects their social relationships, family, and leisure time.<sup>4</sup>

Research has shown a series of positive and negative

psychological and social changes, such as fear, stress, anger, a threat to identity, fear of changing relationships, or a sense of lack of role in retirement. If these changes are not managed correctly, it will reduce the quality of life and satisfaction with life, leading to a decrease in general health, psychosomatic diseases, and even death.<sup>4-6</sup>

During and after retirement, the amount of physical and mental pressure is significantly higher than in the pre-retirement period, which can be the foundation of incompatibility and negative symptoms in retirement, which is called retirement syndrome. Retirement syndrome includes a set of symptoms such as the feeling of

reaching the end of the line, possible emptiness and aimlessness, anxiety, depression, fear of rejection, and other concerns that people experience in different ways after retirement.<sup>7</sup> This syndrome affects the mental health of the elderly. Mental health has a special place among the health issues of the elderly, and it is a state in which a person is aware of self-abilities and can manage the natural stresses of life well and communicate with society.<sup>8</sup>

Adaptability to the transition to retirement is largely unknown. Most retirement plans for employees treat this issue as a single event rather than a complex adjustment process that requires planning.<sup>9</sup> Adaptation to retirement plays a major and sometimes vital role in continuing work and activity, satisfaction and health, reducing retirement syndrome, and, in general, the mental and physical health of retirees. Factors such as readiness for retirement, favorable social and economic status, family and marital status, as well as community support and efficient social communication, can be effective in the adaptation of retirees.<sup>2</sup>

Existential therapy is one thing that can possibly facilitate a person's adaptation to retirement. Existential psychotherapy focuses on free will, self-determination, and the search for meaning within the individual.<sup>10</sup>

This approach emphasizes the individual's capacity to make rational decisions and reach their maximum potential.<sup>11</sup> Existential therapy is a well-known and widespread paradigm that changes the meaning of life and reduces psychological distress. This therapeutic approach is another therapy that can be used to increase and improve the life expectancy and self-care behaviors of these people. This treatment includes different approaches such as existential analysis, existential-humanistic therapy, existential-phenomenological therapy, and meaning therapy.<sup>12</sup>

Existential therapies emphasize responsibility, conscious choice, freedom, awareness, authenticity, and participation. The main goals of these treatments are to help people take responsibility, be independent and autonomous, make moral decisions, manage anxiety, express their conscious intention, participate with others, and establish intimate relationships.<sup>13</sup> The effect of existential therapies on various aspects of life, such as

people's attitude toward life,<sup>14</sup> self-confidence, and feelings of worthlessness,<sup>15</sup> has been confirmed. Studies have also shown that this group of treatments is effective in reducing anxiety, increasing hope, and managing depression.<sup>16</sup>

As the phenomenon of retirement and its psychosocial complications, particularly within the context of Iranian culture, have not been thoroughly investigated, there remains a lack of specific written plans for supporting and caring for the elderly during the transition to retirement.

## Objectives

The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of existential therapy on retired teachers' feelings of helplessness and failure, as well as their feelings of old age and emptiness and their feelings of confusion and conflict.

## Methods

The present study followed a semi-experimental, pre-test, post-test, and control group design to investigate the impact of existential therapy on retired teachers' retirement syndromes. The statistical population was all retired teachers in Kermanshah, Iran, from which 40 participants were randomly selected through an available sampling method and assigned to either an experimental or control group. The Retirement Syndrome Questionnaire developed by Mardani Chamazkoti et al. was administered to all participants during the pre- and post-test phases. The experimental group was subjected to an eight-session, 90-minute existential therapy protocol, while the control group received no training at all. The inclusion criteria stipulated that all participants must be women who had retired as teachers and resided in Kermanshah, while retired teachers returning to teaching after retirement and those retiring due to physical illness were excluded. The research used the Retirement Syndrome Questionnaire, which comprises 40 questions and has four factors with validity and reliability confirmed by Mardani Chamazkoti et al. These factors include the feeling of helplessness and failure (18 questions), the feeling of old age and emptiness (11 questions), the feeling of effort and new orientation (6 questions), and the feeling of confusion and conflict (5 questions). Certain questions (1, 2, 4, 9, 24, 31, 32, 36, 37, 38, and 40) were reverse-

scored, and the questionnaire's response scale was based on five options, namely, never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. The mean of each dimension was analyzed and reported separately, with higher scores reflecting more symptoms of retirement syndrome in the individual.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha of the whole questionnaire was 0.71, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The study employed Yalom's existential therapy protocol to deliver the intervention, consisting of eight 90-minute sessions over a month, to the experimental group. The protocol was specifically designed for retired teachers to receive existential therapy, and Table 1 offers further details on its implementation.

### Statistical analysis

The continuous variables were expressed as the mean  $\pm$  SD, and the categorical variables were presented as a percentage and frequency. Multivariate covariance analysis method was used to analyze the data. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS (version 16.0, SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA). A "P-value" less than 0.05 was considered significant.

### Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. All participants signed an informed consent form.

**Table 1.** Content of existential therapy sessions

	Description
<b>First</b>	Group members swimming with each other, stating the rules governing group counseling, introducing the group and the number of meetings, the commitment of confidentiality of the members with the aim of creating a safe and reliable environment for the members, stating the goals of participating in the group, creating a context of group solidarity and communication together
<b>Second</b>	Establishing communication and increasing solidarity and participation of members, strengthening presence here and now and increasing self-awareness
<b>Third</b>	Encouraging members to self-disclose more, deepening self-awareness
<b>Fourth</b>	Getting to know the psychological concepts of freedom and choice, knowing the place and consequences of freedom and choice in mental health or lack of health
<b>Fifth</b>	Getting to know the concept of responsibility, increasing responsibility towards oneself and others and improving the relationship with oneself and others
<b>Sixth</b>	Understanding and accepting loneliness as an inevitable reality, understanding that loneliness does not conflict with being close to others, understanding the role of intimacy in enduring the feeling of loneliness, accepting the reality of death, understanding the importance of the reality of death for the fulfillment of life.
<b>Seventh</b>	Understanding the meaning and purpose in life, discovering the hidden and obvious meanings in the life of the members, committing to a specific goal in the future life, understanding the concept of self-actualization and excellence, getting to know the characteristics of self-actualization
<b>Eighth</b>	Integrating and explaining the contents of the previous sessions, explaining the treatment experience as the beginning of a new and healthy relationship with others, ending the treatment process.

## Results

The study included a total of 40 retired female teachers, with the experimental and control groups displaying mean ages of  $53.07 \pm 5.56$  and  $52.11 \pm 5.67$  years, respectively. There was no significant difference between the two groups with respect to age ( $p < 0.91$ ,  $f = 0.041$ ). Moreover, there was no significant difference in marital status ( $p = 0.73$ ,  $\chi^2 = 3.03$ ) or education level ( $p = 0.47$ ,  $\chi = 4.51$ , 2)

between the two groups, and Table 2 provides the mean and standard deviation values of the research variables. Notably, normal distribution was observed in all variables ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the box test results indicated that the homogeneity of variance-covariance assumption was established ( $p = 0.655$ ,  $df_2 = 241453$ ,  $df_1 = 3$ ,  $f = 0.67$ ,  $M$  s'Box = 2.14).

**Table 2.** Descriptive indices related to research variables to separate groups

		Experimental group	Control group
		Mean± SD	Mean± SD
<b>Feeling of helplessness and failure</b>	Pre-test	41.41±7.52	40.89±6.90
	Post-test	31.01±6.33	40.02±5.13
<b>Feeling of old age and emptiness</b>	Pre-test	23.33±4.09	19.97±5
	Post-test	23.80±4.12	22.23±4.21
<b>Feeling of confusion and conflict</b>	Pre-test	13.21±3.00	10.02±4.01
	Post-test	13.23±4.03	13.65±4.30

## Discussion

The transition from work to retirement is a significant phase in individuals' lives, affecting daily activities, social interactions, family roles, and self-esteem and identity.<sup>9</sup> It can also lead to mental health disorders, decreased social relationships, a lower life expectancy, feelings of loneliness and stress, and changes in social status.<sup>18</sup> Other studies have highlighted the negative effects of this period, including socioeconomic changes, loss of personal identity and social status, diminished work-related relationships, loneliness, and high probabilities of depression, stress, and anxiety.<sup>19,20</sup> Retirement has been identified as a stressor in old age, yet it has often been overlooked.<sup>21</sup>

The mean score of helplessness and failure in the experimental group significantly differed after existential therapy training compared to before, showing a reduction in this feeling among the participants, according to this study. This finding is in line with the notion that training and preparation can have a positive impact on an individual's psychological state during life transitions such as retirement.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to properly prepare individuals for their transition to retirement.<sup>9</sup>

The analysis of the data showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of feelings of old age and emptiness before and after the training. It can be inferred that the concepts of helplessness, failure, old age, and idleness are all intertwined with feelings of disappointment, despair, and fruitlessness, all of which have a psychological aspect.<sup>7</sup>

Lengthier interventions may be necessary to bring about changes in this dimension. The absence of a substantial change in feelings of old age and unemployment could be attributed to factors such as mid-life crises, fear of change, and anxiety about having spent a significant portion of

one's life. According to Movahed and Hosseini, the societal perception of middle age as the start of aging and bodily decline has a negative impact on both mental and social health.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, the findings of this study indicate a reduction in the overall score of retirement syndrome following the intervention, as reflected in the altered symptomatology of retirement syndrome based on before and after intervention mean scores. The study by Eruki et al. highlighted that existential therapy is instrumental in promoting physical and mental health as well as fostering positive social relationships, which are crucial for maintaining optimal levels of hope, happiness, and quality of life among older adults.<sup>24</sup>

Ng et al.'s research highlights the significance of retirement as an important phenomenon that requires preparation and attention, especially during the initial months following retirement, which are particularly challenging. The "Active and Interested Counselor Plan" training program was found to reduce depression and anxiety among retirees, with an emphasis on training and planning for retirement.<sup>20</sup> In Zarimoghdam et al.'s study, existential therapy training was found to enhance an individual's sense of self-worth and self-perception. 31 Training in existential therapy entails fostering healthy relationships with peers, effectively managing emotional relationships, and prioritizing one's mental and physical well-being, all of which can effectively enhance an individual's mental health.<sup>25</sup>

The present study's findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the crucial role of social support after retirement. As retirement is associated with psychosocial tensions that can negatively affect health, social support can serve as a potent defense against such

tensions. Furthermore, social support has the potential to enhance health and safeguard older adults against disease and mortality.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that this study's focus on retired female teachers may limit its generalizability to retired men, thus suggesting the need for future research involving retirees from diverse organizations to better compare results.

## Conclusions

The present study's findings suggest that conducting sessions in existential therapy can effectively reduce the symptoms of retirement syndrome among retired female teachers. The results also imply that receiving training in this therapy during old age may aid individuals in addressing or mitigating symptoms of retirement syndrome by promoting greater preparation for retirement.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Abbreviations

None.

## Authors' contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript. She take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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## Availability of data and materials

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the

Declaration of Helsinki. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. All participants signed an informed consent form.

## Consent for publication

By submitting this document, the authors declare their consent for the final accepted version of the manuscript to be considered for publication.

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