

## Four Dimensions of Existence

In Existential Psychotherapy we focus on the four dimensions of human existence. These are:

**Physical dimension** On the physical dimension (Umwelt), individuals relate to their environment and to the givens of the natural world around them. This includes their attitude to the body they have, to the concrete surroundings they find themselves in, to the climate and the weather, to objects and material possessions, to the bodies of other people, their own bodily needs, to health and illness and to their own mortality. The struggle on this dimension is, in general terms, between the search for domination over the elements and natural law (as in technology, or in sports) and the need to accept the limitations of natural boundaries (as in ecology or old age). While people generally aim for security on this dimension (through health and wealth), much of life brings a gradual disillusionment and realization that such security can only be temporary. Recognizing limitations can bring great release of tension.

**Social dimension** On the social dimension (Mitwelt), individuals relate to others as they interact with the public world around them. This dimension includes their response to the culture they live in, as well as to the class and race they belong to (and also those they do not belong to). Attitudes here range from love to hate and from cooperation to competition. The dynamic contradictions can be understood in terms of acceptance versus rejection or belonging versus isolation. Some people prefer to withdraw from the world of others as much as possible. Others blindly chase public acceptance by going along with the rules and fashions of the moment. Otherwise they try to rise above these by becoming trendsetters themselves. By acquiring fame or other forms of power, individuals can attain dominance over others temporarily. Sooner or later, however, everyone is confronted with both failure and aloneness.

**Personal/ Psychological dimension** On the psychological dimension (Eigenwelt), individuals relate to themselves and in this way create a personal world. This dimension includes views about their own character, their past experience, and their future possibilities. Contradictions here are often experienced in terms of personal strengths and weaknesses. People search for a sense of identity, a feeling of being substantial and having a self. But inevitably many events will confront them with evidence to the contrary and plunge them into a state of confusion or disintegration. Activity and passivity are an important polarity here. Self-affirmation and resolution go with the former and surrender and yielding with the latter. Facing the final dissolution of self that comes with personal loss and the facing of death might bring anxiety and confusion to many who have not yet given up their sense of self-importance.

**Spiritual dimension** On the spiritual dimension (Überwelt) individuals relate to the unknown and thus create a sense of an ideal world, an ideology, and a philosophical outlook. It is here that they find meaning by putting all the pieces of the puzzle together for themselves. For some people, this is done by adhering to a religion or other prescriptive world view; for others, it is about discovering or attributing meaning in a more secular or personal way. The contradictions that must be faced on this dimension are often related to the tension between purpose and absurdity, hope and despair. People create their

values in search of something that matters enough to live or die for, something that may even have ultimate and universal validity. Usually the aim is the conquest of a soul, or something that will substantially surpass mortality (as for instance in having contributed something valuable to humankind). Facing the void and the possibility of nothingness are the indispensable counterparts of this quest for the eternal.