

# Compatibility of Epicureanism and Existential Therapy

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 30, 2022 at 8:57 AM

I want to explore the compatibility of Epicureanism and Existential Therapy and also applying philosophical thinking to the practice of therapy. A quick online search brings several articles -- Existential therapists have the potential for [using the philosophy of Epicurus in their practice of therapy](#).

First to explain Existential Therapy:

## Quote

Existential therapy is a form of psychotherapy that explores the difficulties that an individual experiences but from a philosophical perspective. This type of therapy focuses on the holistic aspects of the human condition as a whole. Existential therapy focuses on the individual and not the symptoms that the individual is presenting with but also recognizes the power of the individual to choose their actions. Emotional and psychological difficulties are viewed as an inner conflict caused by an individual's confrontation with the givens of existence. Rather than exploring the past, the existential approach looks at the here and now. It can be highly effective with adolescents and adults that are struggling to make healthy life choices, as well as the consequences of their choices.

## What is Existential Therapy?

Existential therapy is a type of talk therapy that is based on some of the main ideas behind existentialism as a philosophy. The goal of existential therapy is to assist individuals in accepting and overcoming existential fears that are inherent in being human. An example of these existential fears includes freedom and responsibility, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. Existential therapists evaluate a person's experience in four dimensions of existence; physical, social, spiritual, and psychological. Through these dimensions are the existential fears of that individual's life explored. Existential therapists look to help individuals live more authentically and to be less concerned with superficiality. Existential therapy focuses on each individual's uniqueness as well as how their choices shape their life. It also helps guide individuals on their journey to self-understanding and self-acceptance. Within existential therapy,

the individual is empowered to take responsibility for the choices that shape their lives. There is no structure to existential therapy therefore the number of sessions is not predetermined like with most cognitive-behavioral therapy. Existential therapy encourages individuals to:

- Evaluate their values, beliefs, and situation.
- Acknowledge their limitations as well as the possibilities for their lives.
- Find meaning and purpose in their lives.
- Develop more effective ways of communicating. (CRC Health, 2019)

The existential approach stresses that:

- All people have the capacity for self-awareness.
- Each person has a unique identity that can be known only through relationships with others.
- People must continually re-create themselves because life's meaning constantly changes.
- Anxiety is part of the human condition.

<https://www.claritychi.com/adult-therapy/...al-therapy/amp/>

#### Quote

The existential approach is first and foremost philosophical. It is concerned with the understanding of people's position in the world and with the clarification of what it means to be alive. It is also committed to exploring these questions with a receptive attitude, rather than a dogmatic one: the search for truth with an open mind and an attitude of wonder is the aim, not the fitting of the client into pre-established categories and interpretations.

The existential approach considers human nature to be open-ended, flexible and capable of an enormous range of experience. The person is in a constant process of becoming. I create myself as I exist. There is no essential, solid self, no given definition of one's personality and abilities.

Existential thinkers avoid restrictive models that categorise or label people. Instead, they look for the universals that can be observed transculturally. There is no existential personality theory which divides humanity up into types or reduces people to part components. Instead, there is a description of the different levels of experience and existence that people are inevitably confronted with.

**Extracts are taken from 'Existential Therapy' (chapter Eight by Emmy van Deurzen, in Dryden, W. ed. The Dryden Handbook of Individual Therapy, London, Sage Publications, 2008.**

<https://nspc.org.uk/about-the-scho...ntial-approach/>

To use all of this in a "self-help" manner:

I would suggest reading about Existential therapy and journaling, all while bringing in Epicurean principles.

I hope to post more on this soon.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of August 30, 2022 at 9:07 AM**

### Quote

Existential thinkers avoid restrictive models that categorise or label people. Instead, they look for the universals that can be observed transculturally.

This kind of statement is usually as far as I have ever gotten in reading. I think I follow what this statement means and it makes sense to me.

The issue I presume looms large, however, is that Epicurus takes many specific positions on issues such as life after death, supernatural gods, and absence of ideal forms which would define Epicurus' take on the nature of existence.

Is it fair to presume that an "Existential Therapist" also takes positions on basic questions about the nature of existence?

### Quote

Existential therapy is a form of psychotherapy that explores the difficulties that an individual experiences but from a philosophical perspective.

So the question is "From WHAT philosophical perspective?" I presume in order for there to be any coherence there much be recognized boundaries on what "Existential Therapy" teaches as to the nature of existence? If so, what are they? I would not be particularly interested in recommending anyone get therapy from someone - even a "professional" - who approaches life from a Platonist or Stoic perspective.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of August 30, 2022 at 9:24 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

So the question is "From WHAT philosophical perspective?"

Existential psychotherapy comes out of the philosophy of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Then there were [later therapists](#) who expanded and adapted new perspectives, and it does appear there is a humanist approach.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of August 30, 2022 at 10:16 AM

Epicureanism says "[Death is nothing to us](#)" but that is really just the tip of the iceberg in considering how and what to believe about death.

Exploration of our beliefs about death are also important within Existential therapy, so this is where there is an overlap, as the belief that this very life is important to live to the fullest and we must choose and take action.

Here is another overview of Existential therapy:

### Quote

Existential therapy takes a philosophical/intellectual approach to therapy. It sees humans as:

- having the capacity for self-awareness, experiencing tension between freedom and responsibility
- creating an identity and establishing meaningful relationships
- searching for the meaning, purpose and values of life
- accepting anxiety as a condition of living
- being aware of death and non-being

Having the capacity for self-awareness means that we as humans can reflect and make choices. We can expand our awareness through realising that:

- we are finite: time is limited

- we have the potential and the choice to act or not to act
- meaning is not automatic – we must seek it
- we are subject to loneliness, meaninglessness, emptiness, guilt and isolation

## **Accepting Freedom and Responsibility**

Existential therapy posits that we are free to choose among alternatives, and thus we are responsible for our lives, actions and any failure to take action. If clients blame others for their problems, therapists in this modality would help them recognise how they allowed others to decide for them and the price they pay for doing so, and would encourage them to consider the alternative options.

Identity is the courage to be: we must trust ourselves to search within and find our own answers. Our great fear is that we will discover that there is no core or self. Clients who are struggling with their identity need to be challenged, asking them in what ways they have lost touch with their identity and are letting others design their life.

## **Relationship to Others**

Existential therapy suggests that we are alone. We as humans must therefore give a sense of meaning to life, decide how we will live, have a relationship with ourselves and learn to listen to ourselves. Humans need to create close relationships with others. Therapists might challenge clients on what they get from their relationships, and how and why they avoid close relationships.

## **Search for Meaning**

Existential therapists encourage clients to ask themselves what they want from life, and where the source of meaning lies for them in life. A trusting therapist-client relationship is important in teaching clients to trust their own capacity to find their way of being. Finding meaning in life is a by-product of engagement, which is a commitment to creating, loving, working and building. Meanwhile, meaninglessness in life leads to emptiness and hollowness (sometimes known as an 'existential vacuum').

## **Anxiety in Existential Therapy**

Anxiety is seen by existential therapists as being a condition of living, naturally arising from a person's striving to survive. This is known as 'existential anxiety' and is a normal outcome of facing the four ultimate concerns in life: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

Once existential anxiety is recognised, it can be dealt with constructively. Anxiety can be a stimulus for growth as we become aware of and accept our freedom. If we have the courage to face ourselves and the challenges of human life, we may be frightened but we can change.

## **Awareness of Death**

Death is seen as providing the motivation for us to live our lives fully and take advantage of each opportunity to do something meaningful.

## **How Existential Therapy Works**

This modality aims to help clients to expand self-awareness, increase potential choices, accept responsibility for their choices, and experience authentic existence. The therapist seeks to understand the client's subjective world, encourage the client to accept personal responsibility, and get them to take responsibility for their role in any problematic life situations.

Existential therapy is not technique-oriented; instead, the interventions used are based on philosophical views about the nature of human existence, and use the therapist's self. It is particularly well-suited to clients who are bereaved, facing significant decisions or developmental crises, coping with failures in marriage and work, or dealing with physical limitations due to age.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses for Multicultural Working**

Existential therapy is applicable to diverse clients who are searching for meaning in their lives, including examining whether their behaviour is being influenced by social and cultural factors. Therapists can help clients to weigh up the alternatives and possible consequences, to recognise how they contribute to their situation, and to identify how they can change their external environment.

However, critics of existential therapy see it as excessively individualistic; for many cultures, it is not possible to talk about self and self-determination outside the context of the social network. This modality can also be seen as ignoring the social factors that cause human problems: even if clients change internally, there may be little hope that the external realities of racism or discrimination will change.

Existential therapy can also be difficult for clients who expect a structured and problem-oriented approach instead of discussion of philosophical questions.

<https://counsellingtutor.com/counselling-ap...ential-therapy/>

Display More

I can imagine that there could be a way to combine Epicureanism and Existential therapy ideas together, and then develop this into a "peer-led support group".

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of August 30, 2022 at 2:19 PM**

Quote from Kalosyni

The goal of existential therapy is to assist individuals in accepting and overcoming existential fears that are inherent in being human. An example of these existential fears includes freedom and responsibility, isolation, meaninglessness, and death.

This seems to be in line with what Epicurus was doing. However I'm not familiar with the nuances of existentialism. It seems to me that its starting point is dealing with how to live in a fully material universe, but I have no idea where it goes from there. My impression is that quite a bit of variety is included under the existentialist umbrella.

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### **Post by “Don” of August 30, 2022 at 4:52 PM**

I've come to take the "nothing" in that phrase to not mean "trivial, meaningless" but rather literally as "no thing." For us, death is a "not a thing", it doesn't exist for us. There is no thing that exists for us individually that is death. When we are, death is not. When we die, we cannot experience anything called "death."

I can say, "my grandmother is dead" but that in no way implies that she is now experiencing some state of existence called "death." She is not \*literally\* dead. She is not experiencing death. "She is dead" is only a conventional way to say she is no longer alive. The way we construct our language implies a dead person is experiencing death. But really, death is nothing.

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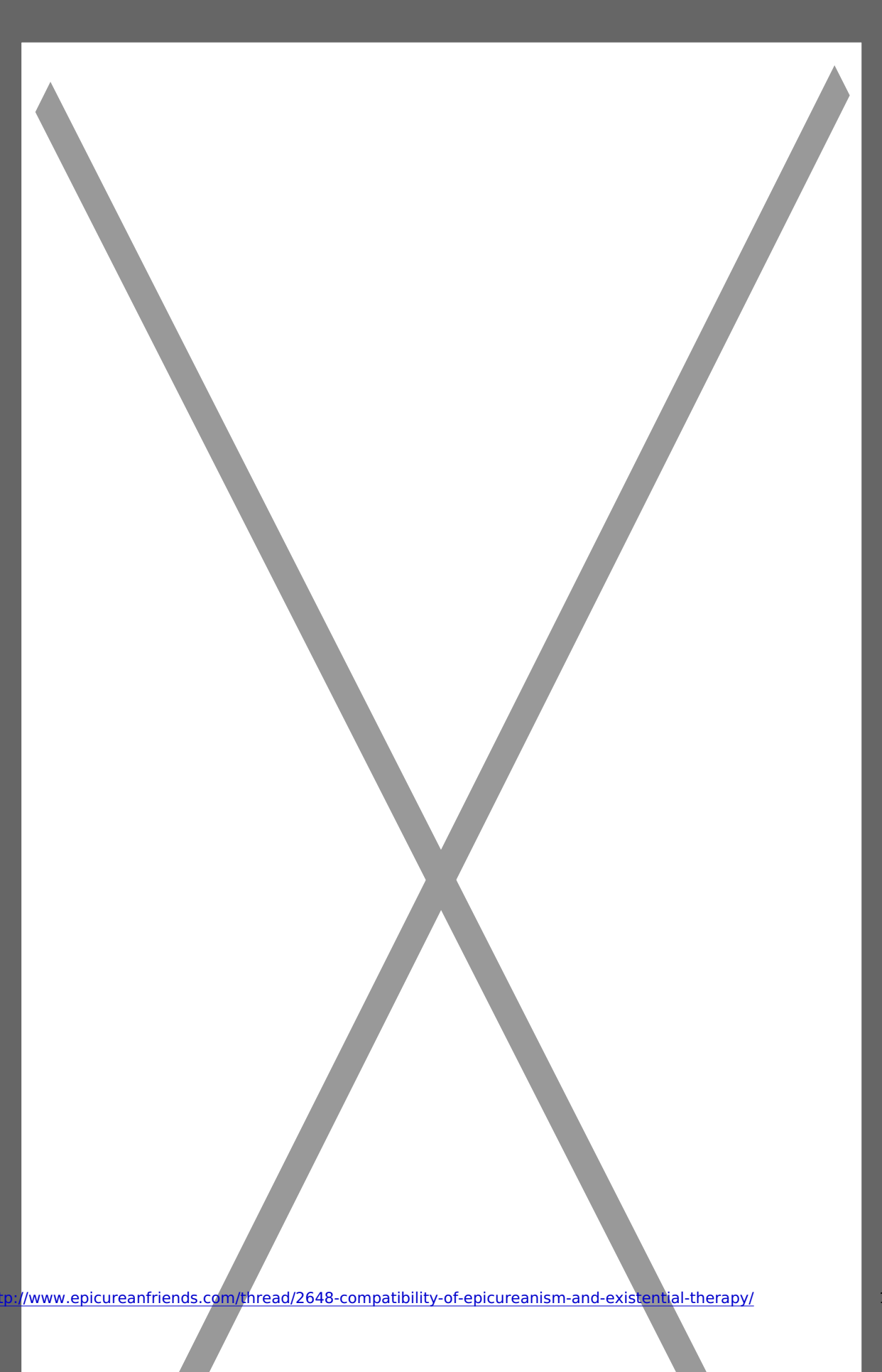
## Post by "Don" of August 30, 2022 at 6:23 PM

Thanks for starting this thread and sharing your interest in this area, [Kalosyni](#) . Here's my take so far:

- From the information above, it looks like there are parallels as well as divergences between Epicureanism and Existential Therapy.
- The idea that Epicurean philosophy is a therapy of sorts is, to me, on target: philosopher's words are empty if they do not heal the suffering of mankind. *For just as medicine is useless if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy is useless if it does not remove suffering from the soul.* Whether that's Existential Philosophy or not is, of course, open to discussion but one that could prove interesting.
- I do like this: *"Existential therapy posits that we are free to choose among alternatives, and thus we are responsible for our lives, actions and any failure to take action."* I have always taken Epicurus to be concerned with personal responsibility. We are responsible for our own actions/choices whether it's for pleasure or for matters of justice.
- I found the section on Existential Anxiety interesting:
  - *Anxiety is seen by existential therapists as being a condition of living, naturally arising from a person's striving to survive. This is known as 'existential anxiety' and is a normal outcome of facing the four ultimate concerns in life: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.*  
*Once existential anxiety is recognised, it can be dealt with constructively. Anxiety can be a stimulus for growth as we become aware of and accept our freedom. If we have the courage to face ourselves and the challenges of human life, we may be frightened but we can change.*
  - We've had a discussion on anxiety and stress elsewhere on the forum recently, but it appears to me that this aspect of Existential Anxiety has parallels with my position on anxiety. I fully concur that "'existential anxiety' and is a normal outcome of facing the four ultimate concerns in life: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness," and it seems that both Epicureanism and Existential Therapy strive to alleviate "existential anxiety." Epicurus simply calls this fear of the gods, fear of death, etc. From that brief excerpt, it doesn't appear that Existential Therapy works to eliminate existential anxiety, but it does appear to try and equip people to deal constructively with it. That does appear parallel to Epicureanism.
- *Finding meaning in life is a by-product of engagement, which is a commitment to creating, loving, working and building.* I'll admit I'm uneasy about "finding meaning in life." For me, the search from some transcendental meaning in life is a fool's errand. The universe is not aware of our existence, nor is there some hidden meaning. That said, we can lead a pleasurable life nonetheless and take joy in living. It seems to me that "finding meaning in life" is just a socially-acceptable way of saying that you are taking pleasure in the things to which you decide to dedicate your life. (insert sarcasm) Heavens! Taking



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### [Philosophy as Therapy](#)

A lot of philosophers I know need therapy. I can't think of too many I know I would want to be my therapist, however. What do philosophers know about...

[www.philosophytalk.org](http://www.philosophytalk.org)

### [Philosophical counseling - Wikipedia](#)

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## **Post by "Cassius" of August 30, 2022 at 6:29 PM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

From the information above, it looks like there are parallels as well as divergences between Epicureanism and Existential Therapy.

I am still not sure how to get my head around the full picture. I think we all have a fairly good understanding of the positions that Epicurus took.

But do we even have a beginning list of what positions "Existential Therapy" takes. Where do we look for such a list, and what authority defines it?

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## **Post by "Don" of August 30, 2022 at 6:51 PM**

[Kalosyni](#) 's done a good job of laying out some of the basics above. There's a Wikipedia article I'm not sure was linked to yet:

### [Existential therapy - Wikipedia](#)

Wikipedia is always good for an overview and links to other resources. That said, we know its limitations (Reference: Epicureanism). It's certainly not a one-to-one correspondence of Existentialism/Existential Therapy and Epicurean philosophy.

This has made me wonder what an Epicurean Therapy would entail 🤔 and how that would differ from and be similar to other philosophical therapies.

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## **Post by "Kalosyni" of August 30, 2022 at 7:06 PM**

There are a lot of books on Existential therapy, and I am sure each author has their own unique twist.

And I think that Epicureanism would put a unique twist on "finding meaning in life" or "making meaning in life" and it would probably be different that the way that existential therapists suggest -- though everything I read seems to indicate that Existential therapy is very open for each person -- there is no one right way to think about things. It is more about making sense of things like death, freedom and responsibility, the subjective sense of having an isolated self, and the on-going process meaning-making (and making sense of life).

Epicureans will make meaning out of life in a very different way than say Christians. We believe that meaning is individually constructed, not handed down to us. There is a lot more to think about than just "Pleasure is the goal in life". And one Epicurean might say: Oh my meaning in life is to understand: "how to live as the gods". But another might say something very different.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of January 13, 2023 at 12:49 AM**

FWIW, this from [Epicurean Philosophy: An Introduction from the "Garden of Athens"](#), page 144, kindle edition:

Quote

the reputable American Professor of Psychiatry and famous writer Irvin Yalom recently wrote: “The more I learn about this extraordinary Athenian thinker, the more strongly I recognize Epicurus as the first existential psychotherapist”

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### **Post by “Don” of January 13, 2023 at 4:07 AM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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[Staring at the Sun - Excerpt — Irvin D. Yalom, MD](#)

Quote

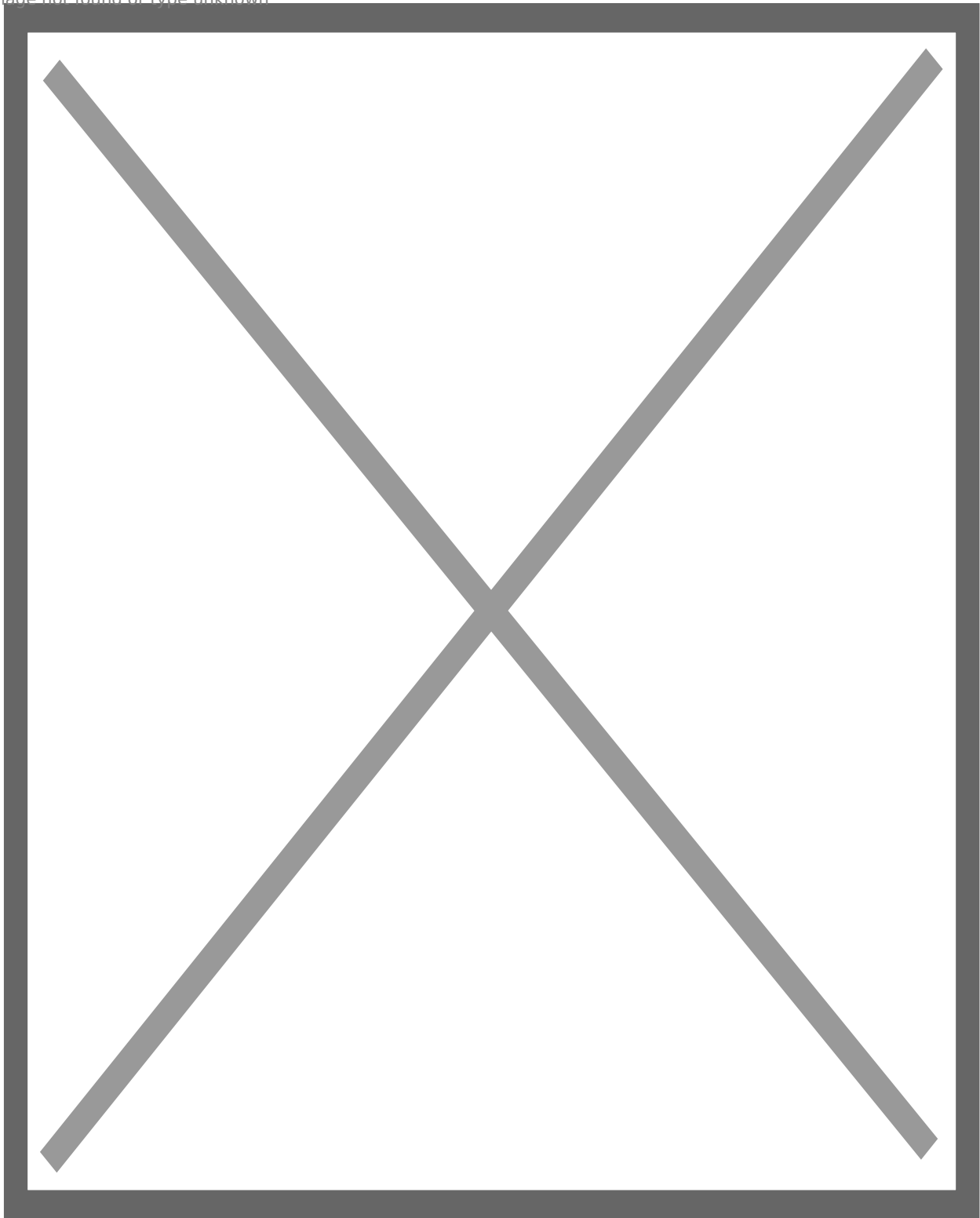
The more I learn about this extraordinary Athenian thinker, the more strongly I recognize Epicurus as the proto-existential psychotherapist, and I will make use of his ideas throughout this work...

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of July 29, 2023 at 9:50 AM**

Here is another good article about Existential Therapy, and *the givens*: "the tension between life and death, between isolation and connection, between freedom and responsibility, and between meaning and meaningless[ness]."

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[Facing the Unavoidable Challenges of Life](#)

Some struggles are universal, but that doesn't mean we are helpless.

[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)

The Letter to Menoecus brings up some aspects of *the givens* in addressing death...and also recommends to not engage in the overindulgence of the profligate (and overindulgence may be a distraction away from properly dealing with the givens). And the Letter to Menoecus recommends studying the Epicurean philosophy with others of like-mind, which would be a way of both finding meaning and connection.

[Letter to Menoecus](#)