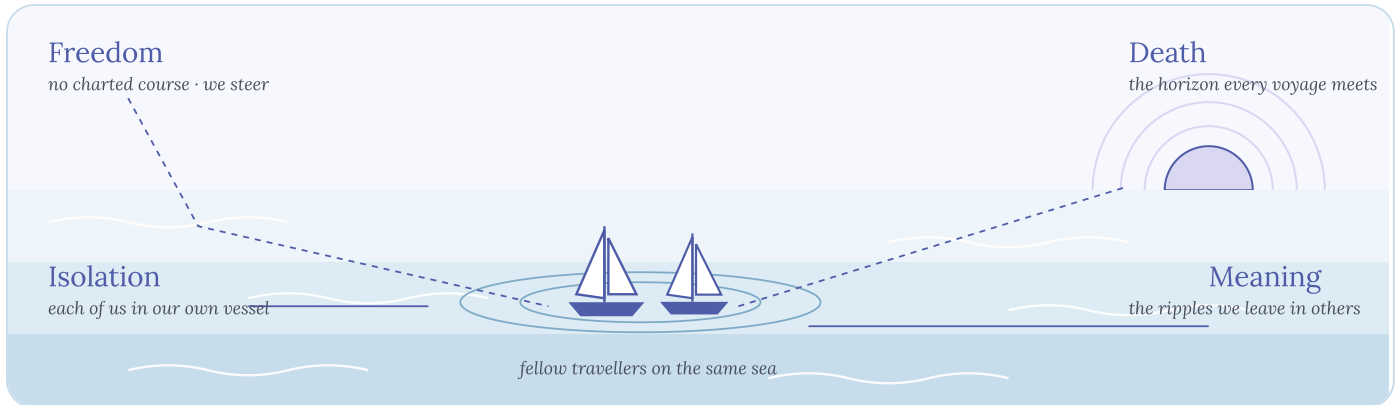


Facing the Givens of Existence

Irvin Yalom's existential psychotherapy and the four ultimate concerns

Psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom (born 1931), emeritus professor at Stanford, described four "givens" that every person meets, and suggested that much anxiety grows from how we face, or turn away from, them.



01 The four givens, and where they touch my life

rate 0 = barely present · 10 = very present

Death	Freedom	Isolation	Meaninglessness
the horizon	the open sea	our own vessel	the ripples
Our lives are finite, and all we love will one day end. May stir · Dread in disguise: health worries, restlessness, control. A way through · An "awakening experience" that sharpens priorities.	There is no fixed script; to a large degree, we author our lives. May stir · Groundlessness; handing choices to others or "fate". A way through · Owning our part: wishing, willing, deciding.	However close we become, some gap between us remains. May stir · Loneliness, or using others as a shield. A way through · Meeting others as people, not as shelter.	Life brings no ready-made meaning, yet we seek it. May stir · Emptiness, drift, or busyness filling the silence. A way through · Meaning as a by-product of engagement: love, craft, service.
○○○○○○○○○○○○○○ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 What has loss or mortality taught me about what matters?	○○○○○○○○○○○○○○ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 What choice am I waiting for someone else to make for me?	○○○○○○○○○○○○○○ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Who could I let know me a little more fully?	○○○○○○○○○○○○○○ 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Where might I already be rippling into others' lives?

02 How we may shield ourselves

two defences against death anxiety

"I am the exception": specialness A quiet sense that ageing, illness and loss don't quite apply to me. It may show up as overwork, relentless striving, risk-taking or a need for control.	"Someone will save me": the ultimate rescuer A hope that some person or power will always step in to protect me. It may show up as dependence, or waiting for life to be changed for me.
☐ Constant busyness	☐ Deferring decisions
☐ Losing myself in others	☐ Waiting to be rescued
☐ Keeping life small	☐ Other: _____

03 In the therapy room

an honest meeting, in the here and now

What the evidence suggests The research base is modest. A 2015 meta-analysis found few, often low-quality trials. Structured meaning-centred therapies showed the clearest benefits, mainly in serious illness; other forms less so. Much of Yalom's work is clinical wisdom rather than tested technique.	Going gently These themes can stir strong feelings. Pause when you need to, and consider exploring them with your psychologist, at a pace that feels right for you.
To bring to my next session: which given feels closest right now, and what would I like to explore? _____ _____	

SOURCES

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