



# Research on Prevention of Affective Nihilism in Existential Depression: an Existential Approach in Educational Settings

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**Abstract.** Existential depression is rooted in nihilism, both emotional and immature that can particularly occur in adolescents at a developmental stage who are seeking meaning in their lives. This article attempts to draw on existential psychotherapy from the perspective of an educational approach to prevent and ameliorate the potential for emotional nihilism in adolescents. This article uses a literature review to the study of the defiant, pervasive, and defensive nature of emotional nihilism. Moreover, it finds that teaching can create a good, pedagogical environments. Through the use of experimental teaching approaches, students can generate more personal narratives and reflections, so as to obtain specific self-awareness, and thus build a mature psychological defenses. Also, this prevents students from developing emotional nihilism to further combat existential depression.

**Keywords:** Affective nihilism; existentialism; existential depression; life-meaning education; depression prevention

## 1 Introduction

Depression is a very common mental illness. It is believed that 5% of individuals worldwide suffer from depression. Meanwhile, depression is a prominent cause of disability globally and a significant contributor to the global illness burden [1]. It is correct to view depression as dimensional, with several states varying in degree and severity, but all sharing a depressed mood as a common aspect. This spectrum includes "normal" states such as sadness, "common unhappiness" [2], and depressed personality, as well as fundamentally pathological conditions such as severe depression, psychotic depression, postpartum depression, or bipolar illness. In this broad depressive range, there is also a disorder known as existential depression, which has largely philosophical consequences [3]. Hobbs (1962) concurs that contemporary society frequently develops neuroses that differ from those outlined by Freud. Modern neuroses are distinguished not so much by suppression, conversion, and a lack of insight as by a loss of a feeling of purpose, of meaning in life [4]. Through a literature review approach, this article will

propose recommendations for prevention strategies for adolescents in educational settings by analyzing existential depression and the emotional nihilism aspects of its emotional and value dimensions with respect to the characteristics of the formation of emotional nihilism and its underlying factors.

## 2 Overview

### 2.1 Existential depression

Haefner (1954) used the phrase "existential depression" to describe a state that has no evident link to earlier psychiatric traumas but with the overall meaning of life and develops when the person experiences a substantial lack of objectives and ambitions [5]. According to Berra (2018), existential depression is defined as a state in which the mood is depressive and arises from specific reflections and concerns on the essence of life [6]. Existential depression has symptoms the same as normal depression, such as fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day and feelings of worthlessness in DSM-5 [7]. Meanwhile, the mood is depressed, as in other types of clinical depression, but there are no documented biological reasons (as in endogenous depression) or unique psychopathological dynamics (such as reactive or neurotic depression) as in psychogenic depression[3]. As a result, existential depression must be considered a non-pathological mental condition that does not necessarily benefit from standard pharmaceutical or psychotherapy therapies. Most therapists regard this sort of depression as being pathologized as a mental disease.

This type of existential depression may be seen as a direct result of doubting life's essential meanings, as well as its eventual emptying and nullification. It is typically associated with a broad sensation of pain and a distressing sense of malaise caused by the loss of existential reference points [6]. Existential sadness and agony are closely related since both include a shift in one's perspective and understanding of existence, oneself, and the universe. Indeed, intense suffering is frequently related to depression. Anxiety and depression are inextricably linked, overlap, and reinforce one another.

### 2.2 Emotional nihilism is incomplete nihilism

**Reactive nihilism.** Nietzsche developed a term called "affective nihilism" to describe the mood and value derivation of existential depression. Affective nihilism is not totally the same as existential nihilism, which demonstrates the position that life has no intrinsic meaning or value [8]. This type of existential despair may be seen as a direct result of doubting life's essential meanings, as well as its eventual emptying and nullification. It is typically associated with a broad sensation of pain and a distressing sense of malaise caused by the loss of existential reference points [6].

Existential sadness and agony are closely related since both include a shift in one's perspective and understanding of existence, oneself, and the universe. Indeed, intense suffering is frequently related to depression. Anguish and depression are inextricably linked, overlapping and strengthening each other. The affective nihilist, according to Nietzsche, occupies a pessimistic, life-denying evaluative stance "full of weariness with

life, full of resistance to life"[9], experiencing "disgust with himself" and humanity, that "great nausea of man" that leads to the "'last will' of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism"[10]. This perspective is important because it is rooted in one's drives and affects: it is an affective stance taken by the "Nay-saying spirit"[11], characterised by a series of negative affective responses such as exhaustion, heaviness, weakness, misery, and debilitating feelings of obstruction or inhibition. Furthermore, as the emotional nihilists demonstrate, such emotions usually refer to a set of purposeful objects, such as life, human existence or human beings, and the world of earthly existence.

**The Universality of Emotional Void.** Affective nihilism, which includes a general passive emotional response to conflicts and stress, is a shortage of the meaning of life but not the devoid meaning of life. Frankl (1972) describes the sense of affect as the existential vacuum or, as he sometimes terms it, "existential frustration" as a common phenomenon, characterized by the subjective state of boredom, apathy, and emptiness [12]. Individuals could feel cynical, lack a sense of direction, and question the meaning of most activities. Furthermore, existential dissatisfaction is becoming more common and spreading throughout the world. According to one survey, 40 percent of college students in Vienna and 81 percent of American college students experience an "existential vacuum"[13]. According to Frankl (1972), fast growth in Czechoslovakia, other Iron Curtain nations, and Africa [12]. Over a two-year period (1970-1972), the prevalence of existential dissatisfaction among young people in Vienna increased by 30 to 80 percent. Furthermore, while any human may feel the aforementioned depressing effects in passing, affective nihilism is a long-term state marked by those effects, not just a brief experience of a will-weakening effect [14]. Therefore, emotional nihilism and existential emptiness may be common emotional states and challenges most people experience in their current environment, and these emotional states and challenges may be accompanied by a persistent depressive state of mind and sense of meaninglessness.

**The defensiveness of emotional futility.** Since affective nihilism comes from a passive, pessimistic, and life-denying evaluative stance, affective nihilism is more likely to function as an immature psychological defense and a spontaneous protective mechanism. Heidegger attempted to see Nietzsche's nihilism as an attempt to gain triumph via the depreciation of the greatest ideals that existed at the time [15]. Furthermore, since psychological defence is based on an unpleasant feeling combined with the belief that something awful is likely to happen (anxiety) or has already happened (depressive mood) [16], it can be seen that affective nihilism derives from personal past depressive experience and comprehension of the possible anxiety from future expectations. People may have a tendency to diminish the original meanings or values in order to alleviate the psychological trauma caused by their own failures. That is, lowering expectations to avoid disappointment and shifting the meaning and value of recognition. Therefore, affective nihilism is more likely to serve as a kind of immature psychological defence and spontaneous defensive strategy. Nonetheless, according to Berra (2019), the affective nihilistic attitude might become extremely gloomy in some aspects, never being balanced by a positive view of existence [3]. Furthermore, existential depression is a

stage, a turning point in an individual's life that must be conquered in existential psychotherapy [3]. Remaining in this agonizing state with no psychological, intellectual, or spiritual growth results in a dangerously pathological and severe kind of depression. Therefore, as educators, to prevent the emergence of existential psychotherapy, it is important to help or educate individuals to build their own values against the traumas and failures they experience. Based on the understanding of existential psychotherapy, a mature psychological defence is formed in the stage of its value development.

### **3 Pragmatism and individualism in education**

#### **3.1 The contradiction between pragmatism and individualism**

Based on Nietzsche's description of how internalized customs and norms have generated an effect on controlling one's desires and weaken one's end-directedness, the affective nihilist may perceive that this worldly existence is inherently exhausting or as weighed down by the oppressive heaviness of life [17]. In terms of the prevalent cultural customs and social norms, rationalism and pragmatism continue to dominate the metanarrative. Since the Renaissance awakened the consciousness of man as a subject by means of intuition, senses and experience, it promoted the separation of subject and object [3]. The Reformation continued to focus on the "emotions and desires" of the individuals, while emphasizing "independence and subjectivity as a creature", and succeeded in secularizing the whole society [18]. Furthermore, after the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, rationalism became the supreme belief, and God was replaced. The result of this is that natural science, technology, and material resources have achieved great development [19]. Although this modern thinking pattern has played a very positive role in the progress of society and the economy, rationality-based thinking has also created a crisis. Since rationality is only a part of the wholeness of human beings, which could include sensibility, rationality, desire, and practicality, it is not able to meet the needs of the human heart and spirit. Additionally, after the Second World War, the tendency toward rationalism and pragmatism had become mainstream and metanarrative. While bringing benefits on the material level, the education of the pragmatism concept, especially the education of the mind and beliefs, has great defects and regrets. Pragmatism obviously regards education as a means of training tools and machines, but in essence, education should be training students to become fully developed human beings.

Under the influence of modernity's metanarrative, people tend to follow the meaning and sense of value brought by the grand narrative in the adolescent stage of education. However, when people become more mature and figure out their real inner needs and authenticity, they may find that they are in conflict with the meaning and values built under metanarrative. Therefore, when this contradiction is not well transformed, or when the goals originally based on pragmatism are not successfully achieved, we could have a devaluation of values and beliefs to defend against a sense of loss and thus a sense of meaninglessness, and turn to 'localized' narratives. To solve this modern dilemma, Lyotard recommended that metanarratives be replaced with *petits récits*, or more modest and "localized" tales that can "throw off" the grand narrative by focusing

on a single event. Meanwhile, some postmodernists tried to replace metanarratives by emphasizing distinct local circumstances and the diversity of human experience. Rather than big, all-encompassing theories, they pushed for a "multiplicity of theoretical stand-points"[20]. Therefore, considering the conflicts between the grand narrative and localized narratives, the educators should help teenagers build up multidimensional values and guide them to find their inner needs and authenticity.

### **3.2 Constructability of meaning in life for student**

According to existential psychotherapy, being in an authentic mode somehow does not enable to avoid the question about the meaning of life. Returning to a dimension of regular living, or inauthenticity, where the topic does not arise, is a tough and sometimes impossible task [21]. In this sense, Sartre claim that meaning is always constructed anew by each of us, rather than acquired or discovered. Furthermore, Jaspers (1919) discovers that behind single existence a transcendental architecturally "blank and naked reticulate" where the individual fills with meaning, thereby shaping their existence and perspective of the universe [23]. Preventing existential depression and overcoming affective nihilism requires assisting learners in becoming more conscious of the arbitrary repercussions of the mental functioning and the relativity of their insights. The consequent "emptying" of reality forces people to pick a route away from the soothing but artificial claims of the intricate conceptions. Therefore, it is meaningful for educators to make students aware of the constructability of meaning in life while adopting personal narrative as a position.

### **3.3 Suggestions and Improvements for Emotional Nihilism in the Field of Education**

As for overcoming affective nihilism, Nietzsche proposed basically two kinds of life practice strategies [23]. The first is living experimentally by placing oneself in a variety of potentially stimulating climates and contexts. As for educational practice, for instance, in Finnish educational systems, teachers tend to teach away from textbooks with interdisciplinary trends [24]. Meanwhile, phenomenal teaching, or theme teaching, has emerged. The teachers are encouragers, and the students are the main body. Therefore, the educators could create various contexts and help every individual build their own values and explore more about their inner selves.

The second advice from Nietzsche to overcome affective is undertaking particular practices of self-knowledge, especially the formation and reflection upon a personal narrative. In terms of educational practice, in the Finnish educational system, with the increasing challenges of life science and artificial intelligence to human society, mining, exploring the essential differences between humans, machines and tools has also become the core of character education. Educators would help students explore the innovation, elasticity and unpredictability that come with them as human beings. Also, educators can encourage students to investigate human freedom, human emotion will, and the sacredness and meaning of life in their own narrative.

According to Nietzsche, both of these strategies employ the production of affect in an individual to potentially energize one's will and stimulate one's drives. Based on these strategies, educators could provide life-value guidance for students to build more authentic selves and stronger drives to overcome their possible existential problems and setbacks in the future.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, emotional nihilism can be predicted and resisted in educational settings through an existential approach. Because of the high potential for the spread of emotional nihilism among adolescents and the sense of being blocked or inhibited, we suggest that teaching can create good pedagogical environments in which students say no less often. And use experimental teaching methods that allow students to generate more personal narratives and reflections, gain concrete self-awareness, and build mature psychological defenses. to prevent students' emotional nihilism and further prevent existential depression. However, since the conditions in educational settings could be unstable and incidental, it is challenging for individuals to live experimentally by placing themselves in various climates and contexts. Therefore, it is more feasible and profound for educators to create environments for students to explore their own drives and standpoints and prevent possible affective nihilism in their lives. For further studies, the relationship between affective nihilism and existential depression needs to be experimentally and globally tested, while the hypotheses about the nature of affective nihilism also need to be tested experimentally and relevant scales developed for testing.

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