RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

# Facing the "mortal wound": what do we discover within ourselves?

*Diante da "ferida mortal": o que encontramos em nós?*
*Ante la «herida mortal»: ¿qué encontramos en nosotros mismos?*

Israel Ribeiro Gomes[1]– FAMATH - Faculdade Maria Thereza, israelrigom@gmail.com | ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0953-4652
Anna Paula Rezende Campos[2]– FAMATH - Faculdade Maria Thereza, annarp8@hotmail.com / annaprezende@gmail.com | ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-2630

**Abstract:**
This research was developed through a bibliographic review aimed at defining Existential Psychology, as well as psychotherapeutic practice and the concept of death anxiety from Irvin Yalom's perspective. A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory methodological approach was adopted to analyze the author's autobiographical narrative regarding his experience of confronting death within his family context, as described in the work A Matter of Death and Life: Love, Loss, and What Matters in the End. The objective was to understand, based on Yalom's writings, the possible changes in the meanings attributed to death anxiety by comparing his previous works, used as the theoretical foundation of this research, with the writings produced during his wife's illness, from the cancer diagnosis to her death. This study made it possible to conclude the importance of the Existential Psychology perspective in the construction of an individual's subjectivity when facing a delicate and painful situation, such as the possibility of losing a family member. Furthermore, it was observed that prior and regular reflection on death did not shield the author from experiencing the pain of that situation; however, it enabled him to face it without a sense of unfamiliarity regarding the possibility of his wife's death. This did not make the experience easy, but it revealed a more receptive rather than defensive attitude toward an inevitable circumstance of life.

**Keywords:**
Existential Psychology. Death anxiety. Irvin Yalom.

**Resumo:**
A presente pesquisa foi estruturada a partir de uma revisão bibliográfica para definir a psicologia existencial, assim como a prática psicoterapêutica e o conceito de ansiedade de morte na perspectiva de Irvin Yalom. Construiu-se uma metodologia de abordagem qualitativa, de caráter descritivo e exploratório para análise da narrativa autobiográfica do autor no enfrentamento da morte no seu contexto familiar, conforme registrou na obra Uma questão de vida e morte: amor, perda e o que realmente importa no final. Objetivou-se compreender a partir da escrita de Yalom, as possíveis mudanças de significado atribuídos à ansiedade de morte comparando suas obras anteriores, utilizadas na fundamentação teórica desta pesquisa, com os escritos produzidos durante o processo de adoecimento da sua esposa, desde o diagnóstico de câncer até o seu falecimento. Este estudo permitiu concluir sobre a importância da perspectiva da Psicologia Existencial na construção da subjetividade de um indivíduo diante de uma situação delicada e dolorosa, como a possibilidade de morte de um familiar. Além disso, constatou-se que a reflexão sobre a morte de forma prévia e regular, não blindou o autor de sentir a dor daquela situação, contudo o permitiu vivenciá-la sem um estranhamento acerca da possibilidade da morte de sua esposa, o que não significou ser fácil, mas apresentou um comportamento mais receptivo do que defensivo em relação a uma circunstância inevitável da vida.

---

[1] Undergraduate Psychology student at Faculdade Maria Thereza. – Email: israelrigom@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0953-4652

[2] Master's degree in Psychology from Universidade Federal Fluminense and faculty member at Faculdade Maria Thereza. – Emails: annarp8@hotmail.com / annaprezende@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7272-2630

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

**Palavras-chave:**
Psicologia Existencial. Ansiedade de morte. Irvin Yalom.

**Resumen:**
La presente investigación se estructuró a partir de una revisión bibliográfica destinada a definir la Psicología Existencial, así como la práctica psicoterapéutica y el concepto de angustia de muerte desde la perspectiva de Irvin Yalom. Se adoptó una metodología cualitativa, descriptiva y exploratoria para analizar la narrativa autobiográfica del autor al afrontar la muerte en su contexto familiar, según lo registrado en la obra Una cuestión de vida y muerte: amor, pérdida y lo que realmente importa al final. El objetivo fue comprender, a partir de los escritos de Yalom, los posibles cambios en los significados atribuidos a la angustia de muerte, comparando sus obras anteriores, utilizadas como fundamento teórico de esta investigación, con los textos producidos durante la enfermedad de su esposa, desde el diagnóstico de cáncer hasta su fallecimiento. El estudio permitió concluir la importancia de la perspectiva de la Psicología Existencial en la construcción de la subjetividad del individuo ante una situación delicada y dolorosa, como la posible muerte de un familiar. Además, se constató que la reflexión previa y regular sobre la muerte no protegió al autor del dolor de aquella situación; sin embargo, le permitió vivirla sin extrañeza ante la posibilidad de la muerte de su esposa. Esto no hizo que la experiencia fuera fácil, pero reveló una actitud más receptiva que defensiva ante una circunstancia inevitable de la vida.

**Palabras clave:**
Psicología Existencial. Angustia de muerte. Irvin Yalom.

## 1 Introduction

Throughout history, human beings have always carried existential concerns, and the inevitable encounter with death is one of them. Unlike other living beings, humans are aware of their own death, which enables them to reflect on this future moment and anticipate it in the realm of ideas. This reflection, however, generates feelings that directly affect well-being and the way individuals experience the world.

Existential-Humanistic Psychology, whose foundations derive from existential philosophy and humanistic psychology (ERTHAL, 2017, p. 57), includes death among its concepts. Psychiatrist and therapist[3] Irvin Yalom (1980, p. 29) understands death and life as interdependent, as presented in his book Existential Psychotherapy. Because existential

[3] Consistent with recurring usage in scientific literature, the terms “psychologist,” “psychotherapist,” and “therapist” are used synonymously to refer to the professional who conducts psychotherapy. It should be noted, however, that in Brazil the title of psychologist is granted upon active registration with the Regional Council of Psychology (CRP), whereas part of the literature used is North American in origin, reflecting a different cultural and institutional reality. Similarly, the terms “patient” and “client” are used equivalently in this study to refer to the person undergoing psychotherapy.

psychotherapy addresses existential concerns, Yalom (2024, pp. 138-139) states that therapists should not avoid talking about death in therapy; however, openness to this dialogue is partly conditioned by the professional's ability to know how to use the subject in clinical practice. Consistent with this perspective, Yalom (2024, pp. 140-141) argues that the idea of death can save us, enabling significant and positive personal changes and an improvement in life. Nevertheless, Yalom (2008, p. 16) emphasizes that it is not easy to live constantly and fully aware of death; it would be like trying to stare at the sun.

In particular, during the early stages of his development, from early childhood through adolescence, as classified by Papalia and Martorell (2021, pp. 88-91), the researcher of this article was immersed in a family environment in which death was not treated as taboo, but was addressed by his parents as a fact of life that needed to be remembered from time to time. During the period mentioned above, the researcher's perspective on death was not grounded in the theoretical framework of psychology or philosophy. That occurred years later, after he began his undergraduate studies in Psychology and, especially, encountered the author Irvin Yalom when one of his professors recommended the book Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death during a conversation. Unexpectedly, months later, the researcher would experience grief over his own father's death, and this work provided philosophical support for processing those experiences.

This context gave rise to the present research, whose objective was to understand how Irvin Yalom constructed meaning regarding death anxiety beyond theory, based on an autobiographical experience reported in A Matter of Death and Life. The question in the title of this study, “What do we discover within ourselves?”, seeks to prompt reflection on what an individual who knows widely disseminated theories about finitude can find within as support and as a strategy for facing a situation as delicate as the death of a loved one—a situation for which there can be no rehearsal and no delegation of responsibilities or emotions.

Thus, the concept of Existential Psychology is first presented, together with the constitution of its theoretical framework and important references for the origin of this approach to Psychology. Death is highlighted as an existential concern, as is the importance of not denying it, because it is directly connected to an individual's life and to the possibility of understanding oneself and having a life that is truly understood and fully lived (MAY, 1986, p. 71). In addition, Irvin Yalom's conception of death in existential psychotherapy, the definition of death anxiety, and how it can be recognized are presented. The author states that “The most powerful boundary experience is the confrontation with one's own death” (YALOM, 2024, p. 141, our translation).

Next, the scientific methodology used to conduct this content analysis is discussed, grounded in Bardin (2016), with the stages of pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of results, inference, and interpretation. First, the work was analyzed in its entirety, and the chapters were selected according to authorship and the period to which they referred, because the book was coauthored with Yalom's wife, Marilyn. Authorship of the chapters alternated between Irvin Yalom and Marilyn Yalom, and all were written in the first person. Therefore, only the chapters written by Irvin Yalom were selected. It is important to emphasize that the book was new to the researcher; until the preparation of this study, he had not read it. The work also includes accounts after Marilyn Yalom's death. Thus, the chapters written by Irvin Yalom up to his wife's death were considered eligible, because this research does not seek to enter the period of grief after a person's actual death. Subsequently, textual excerpts were selected according to previously established criteria; all excerpts were then indexed with codes, the recording units (RU), and finally categorized according to the themes emerging in each direct quotation from the author's account.

Yalom's theoretical foundation, identified through the literature review, was compared with the reflections he shared as an individual who experienced and recorded existential concerns within his family context. Finally, conclusions are developed from the analysis of the author's autobiographical accounts of his experience from the period of cancer treatment through his wife's assisted death.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Death as an existential concern

Existential-Humanistic Psychology, which constitutes the third force in Psychology, relies on existential philosophy and humanistic psychology to ground its principles, as presented by Erthal (2017, p. 57); according to Angerami (2018, p. 132), this conceptualization was created by Americans. Thus, one can observe the contribution of concepts derived from the theoretical frameworks of existentialism and humanism in constructing this possible approach to the practice of Clinical Psychology.

> Humanistic psychology is considered the third force because it follows psychoanalysis (the first force) and behaviorism (the second force). Both theoretical currents have had, and continue to have, importance for

> psychological science; therefore, this is not a matter of one prevailing over the other. However, we also know that psychoanalysis and behaviorism hold more pessimistic views of the human being and did not consider the study of human potential, self-actualization, and personal growth. (OLIVEIRA, 2022, p. 76, our translation).

The philosophical contributions derive from the works of several philosophers: the "[...] main existentialist thinkers are Søren Kierkegaard (Danish, 1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (German, 1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (German, 1889-1976), and Jean-Paul Sartre (French, 1905-1980)" (ANGERAMI, 2018, p. 20, our translation). Humanistic psychology, in contrast, has no theoretical body of its own and therefore encompasses the lines of thought of A. Maslow, G. Allport, R. May, C. Rogers, E. Fromm, and C. Bühler, according to Erthal (2017, p. 51).

> Humanistic and existential psychology began to propose new ways of thinking not only about the therapeutic process with the patient, but also about the psychotherapeutic stance of psychology professionals. In this sense, this approach emerged as an alternative that made it possible to think of the human being in their totality—or, more precisely, in the totality of their experience before the phenomenon: their anxiety, solitude, responsibility, becoming, and potential. (DIONISIO, 2022, p. 22, emphasis added, our translation).

It is essential to emphasize that "[...] the existential approach to therapy is not a set of technical procedures, but fundamentally an attitude, a sensitivity to the facts of life that are inherent in the human condition" (YALOM; LESZCZ, 2006, p. 95, our translation); it is a "[...] form of dynamic psychotherapy" (YALOM, 1980, p. 6, our translation), and "[...] it will never be a systematized practice with formally delimited precepts and rules" (ANGERAMI, 2018, p. 153, our translation).

> Thus, the principal objective of existential psychotherapy is to increase the potential for choice; to offer effective help to clients so that they may discover and manage themselves; to help them accept the risks of their own responsible decisions and accept the freedom to use their own capacities in order to exist. (ERTHAL, 2017, p. 80, emphasis added, our translation).

According to Angerami (2018), the main fundamental existential concepts that guide a psychologist's work in this approach include existence, freedom, solitude, essence, being-in-the-world, death, meaning of life, transcendence, authenticity, anxiety, love, existential boredom, guilt, faith, and happiness. Erthal (2017, pp. 57-62), in turn, lists freedom, self-awareness, risk, existential anxiety, guilt, being-in-the-world, emptiness, death, and nonbeing. However, given the objective of this research and the breadth of existential concepts, only the

concept of death is examined in depth in Section 2.1, while death anxiety is addressed in Section 2.2.

> A value that is difficult to reformulate, yet strongly emphasized in this approach, is the concept of death. Death makes present the idea that time for realizing possibilities is limited. The execution of one's project is directly linked to the existential direction within the human being. Everyone becomes anxious at the possibility of nonbeing, at the possibility that opportunities to carry out their life projects may end. (ERTHAL, 2017, p. 61, emphasis added, our translation).

Human existence is characterized by awareness of one's own death and finitude. Erthal (2017, pp. 152-153) emphasizes that finitude is a structure of consciousness, whereas death is a facticity, just like birth.

> Thus, unlike Heidegger, Sartre does not view death as a possibility, but as a contingent fact that escapes the subject. Heidegger identifies death with finitude. Yet even if we were immortal, we would still be finite, Sartre tells us. Finitude is a structure of consciousness that determines freedom. Human reality makes itself finite insofar as it chooses itself as human—that is, as a free project toward an end. By choosing A and not B, I reject B in order to realize the possible A. If I were immortal, nothing would prevent me from returning to B later. Yet that opportunity would no longer be the same. The choice becomes unique. (ERTHAL, 2017, pp. 152-153, emphasis added, our translation).

The choice becomes unique because, even if there is still time to choose a possibility that was not chosen before, changes will have occurred during that interval: the circumstances at the time of choice will have changed, as will the individual who is able to choose. The researcher, for example, experienced his finitude when, in 2017, he chose to study Business Administration rather than Psychology—the best strategy in that situation because of circumstances beyond his control—even though he knew he wanted to become a psychologist. Four years later, the possibility of choosing Psychology became available; however, the field was no longer the same, the researcher had acquired a different repertoire of life experiences and professional goals, and the college curriculum had been updated. The choice was made four years later, but the opportunity was no longer the same; its configuration had changed.

In light of this conceptual distinction, this research was designed specifically to address death—although finitude is also directly related to it—and therefore explored the final event in

depth: the “mortal wound[4]” (YALOM, 2008, p. 13) and “[...] an absent presence” (MAY, 1986, p. 68, our translation).

Reflection on human death has been studied since ancient philosophy. Examples include philosophers such as Epictetus (2023, p. 16), who states in The Art of Living that death is not terrible, but our notion of it is, and Seneca (2025, p. 40), who states in On the Shortness of Life that an entire lifetime is needed to learn how to live, just as it is needed to learn how to die. Thus, it can be emphasized that:

> 1. Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death continuously vibrates beneath the membrane of life and exerts a profound influence on experience and behavior.
> 2. Death is a primary source of anxiety and, as such, constitutes the principal origin of psychopathology. (YALOM, 1980, p. 29, emphasis added, our translation).

Thus, reflecting on death has a direct impact on an individual's existence. For example, understanding that one's time is limited creates a need to make choices, because it is impossible to live all of life's possibilities at the same time or even over the course of a whole lifetime. Choosing a city or country in which to live, even for only a few months, means that another possibility is not being lived during that period; one has ceased living somewhere else. As already presented, throughout life a person has opportunities to make choices, but one day that possibility will end because human beings are mortal.

> For existentialists in general, life's limitation is what gives it meaning. It is its temporal nature that makes us take life more seriously. For this reason, death cannot be denied. Denying the inevitability of death consequently limits the enrichment of life itself. However, some schools of thought make death a constant concern, while others refer to it only as a way of intensifying the present moment. Heidegger (1949) is the principal representative of the first thesis. [...] Sartre (1943) represents a second line of thought. (ERTHAL, 2017, pp. 150-151, emphasis added, our translation).

Rollo May (1986, p. 71) supports this idea by stating that the price of denying death is the creation of undefined anxiety and self-alienation within oneself, and that in order to understand oneself, a person must face death. May (1986, p. 81) further explains that only when a person honestly confronts the idea of death and becomes aware of their own death can they

[4] Yalom’s (2008, p. 13) metaphor of death as a mortal wound may be understood as an event for which no cure is possible, regardless of the effort and resources an individual devotes to healing it. A wound is possible within human existence: the individual’s physical structure may be ruptured at some point, for example by a sharp object. A mortal wound, however, is not merely any wound; its name already indicates an identifiable and irrevocable outcome, and it becomes a means through which human mortality is realized.

have a life that is truly understood and fully lived. This perspective suggests that, by failing to confront the idea of their own death, a person begins to distance themselves from their own nature and from real facts. This distancing is a fruitless attempt, because such behavior in no way changes one's mortal condition or makes one immortal; instead, it turns the individual into an alienated being, unable to think and use resources such as time realistically and efficiently.

> Among the well-known existential therapists, Yalom (1931) most strongly reaffirms the existential stance. Although he defines existential therapy as a dynamic model, he describes a different, fundamental conflict within the person: the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence, which constitutes the content of existential conflict. (ERTHAL, 2017, p. 211, our translation).

The deepening of an individual's self-awareness in relation to their own existence arises from understanding the distinction Yalom (2008, p. 38) presented between “how things are” and “that things are,” respectively a reinterpretation of Heidegger's formulation of the everyday and ontological modes.

> In the everyday mode, you are fully integrated into your surroundings and become absorbed in how things are in the world, whereas in the ontological mode you focus on the fact that things are in the world [...]. When absorbed in the everyday mode, you turn to fleeting distractions such as physical appearance, style, possessions, or prestige. In the ontological mode, by contrast, you not only become more aware of existence, mortality, and the other immutable features of life, but also become more anxious and inclined to bring about significant changes. You are induced to embrace your fundamental human responsibility to construct an authentic life of commitment, connectedness, meaning, and fulfillment. (YALOM, 2008, pp. 38-39, emphasis added, our translation).

According to Yalom and Leszcz (2006, p. 98), the change that moves an individual to enter the ontological mode and live authentically cannot be forced. A person is transported there through transformative experiences—the “boundary experiences” they undergo—and the therapist must therefore remain attentive to them. The author further states that philosophers “[...] often speak of ‘boundary experiences’—urgent experiences that wrench us out of the ‘everyday’ and fix our attention upon ‘being’ itself. The most powerful boundary experience is a confrontation with one's own death” (YALOM, 2024, p. 141, our translation). However, Yalom (2008, pp. 40-68; 2024, p. 142) cites other catalysts, among which several may be highlighted: grief over the death of someone one cares about; a life-threatening illness; the end of an intimate relationship; an important life milestone such as a fiftieth, sixtieth, or seventieth birthday; a catastrophic trauma such as a fire, rape, or assault; children leaving home (the empty

nest); the birth of grandchildren; job loss; retirement; and newspaper reports of accidents, atrocities, and obituaries.

This transition from the everyday mode to the ontological mode, mentioned by the authors, can be illustrated by the change in the subjects contemplated by a person whose family member is hospitalized in serious condition. Previously, the person's focus might have been on following the weekly routine, maintaining and improving their appearance, or realizing dreams such as taking a trip. Now the focus shifts to whether the family member will recover and stay alive; it shifts to the fact that we all die and forget it. Immersed in the ontological mode, anyone's focus changes. Being transported into the ontological mode is almost like receiving an invitation that cannot be refused: the recipient may choose not to attend the event, but knows that the invitation was received and read.

Next, Section 2.2 discusses the epistemology that underpins Yalom's clinical practice regarding existential concerns, presenting his perspective on the Existential Psychology approach as a psychotherapist, the function of reflection on death in therapy, and the definition of death anxiety and how to recognize it.

## 2.2 The conception of death anxiety in Irvin Yalom's existential psychotherapy

In his work Existential Psychotherapy, in which he shares the conceptual framework of his clinical practice grounded in Existential Psychology, Yalom (1980, pp. 8-9) begins from the understanding that human beings confront four givens of existence: death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness.

> The existential approach holds that the fundamental human struggle is against the “givens” of existence, the basic concerns of the human condition: death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Anxiety emerges from basic conflicts in each of these areas: (1) we wish to continue being, but are aware of inevitable death; (2) we need structure, yet must face the truth that we are the authors of our own model of life and beliefs, and that our neural apparatus is responsible for the shape of reality—beneath us lies Nichts[5], nothingness, the void, the abyss; (3) we desire contact, protection, and participation in a greater whole, yet feel the inescapable gap between ourselves and others; and (4) we are creatures who need meaning, cast into a world without intrinsic meaning. (YALOM; LESZCZ, 2006, p. 96, emphasis added, our translation).

[5] A German-language term meaning nothingness, void, or abyss.

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

When discussing his psychotherapeutic approach, Yalom (2008, pp. 157-158) clarifies his understanding of the term "existential," emphasizing that he uses it literally to refer to existence, which is his key concept.

> The existential worldview on which I base my clinical work embraces rationality, avoids supernatural beliefs, and postulates that life in general—and human life in particular—arose from random events; that, despite our wish to continue existing, we are finite creatures; that we are placed alone in existence, without a life structure or predetermined fate; and that each of us must decide how to live as fully, happily, ethically, and meaningfully as possible (YALOM, 2008, p. 159, emphasis added, our translation).

The existential concerns[6] with which human beings are confronted can be summarized as follows (YALOM, 1980, pp. 8-9):

a) Death: the most evident ultimate concern. There is no escape from death, and this terrible truth elicits mortal terror. A central existential conflict originates in the tension between awareness of the inevitability of death and the desire to continue existing;

b) Freedom: another ultimate concern, far less accessible, is freedom, which is intrinsically linked to fear. In its existential sense, "freedom" refers to the absence of external structure. The human being is entirely responsible—the author of their own world, life project, choices, and actions. In this sense, freedom carries a terrifying implication: beneath us there is no foundation at all—nothing, a void, an abyss. A fundamental existential dynamic then arises: the conflict between confronting this groundlessness and desiring a foundation and structure;

c) Existential isolation: a third concern. It is a fundamental isolation from both others and the world that underlies all other forms of isolation. Even when we become close to another person, a final, insurmountable gap remains: each of us enters existence alone and must leave it alone. Thus, existential conflict consists of the tension between awareness of our absolute isolation and the desire for contact, protection, and belonging to something greater;

d) Meaninglessness: a fourth concern. It arises from recognizing one's mortality, absolute isolation, and responsibility for creating one's own meaning in life. This existential dynamic conflict stems from the dilemma of a creature that seeks meaning but is cast into a universe devoid of meaning.

The development of Yalom's theory as a psychotherapist was also greatly influenced by Rollo May's theory—first through May as an author, then as Yalom's therapist and friend

[6] In his book *Existential Psychotherapy*, the author states that "*This book delas with four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness*" (YALOM, 1980, p. 8). Thus, in a free translation, the concepts of ultimate concern and existential concern are used synonymously to refer to death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness.

(YALOM, 2008, p. 137). Yalom's works reveal the strong contribution of several philosophers' ideas, and some direct quotations are even introduced in dialogues with his patients. The origin of this philosophical perspective occurred as follows:

> When May's book Existence was published during my second year of residency, I devoured every page and felt that an intelligent and entirely new perspective was opening before me. I immediately began studying Western philosophy. Since then, I have continued reading and attending philosophy courses, which have always seemed to contain more wisdom relevant to psychotherapy than the theoretical literature of my field (YALOM, 2008, p. 138, our translation).

Based on Erthal (2017, p. 197), it should be reiterated that the existential approach to psychotherapy adopts a philosophical position that supports the assumptions and attitudes of the psychotherapeutic process, with the aim of grounding the explanation and understanding of clinical matters. Among the philosophical references on which Yalom (2008, pp. 70-95) draws are Epicurus and Nietzsche. The author states that “Ideas have power. The insights of many great thinkers and writers throughout the centuries help us master disturbing thoughts about death and discover meaningful paths through life” (YALOM, 2008, p. 69, our translation). Drawing on these philosophers' ideas, Yalom introduces into his clinical practice concepts that support his patients as they address concerns about death.

From the arguments developed by the philosopher Epicurus, Yalom (2008, pp. 70-73) highlights the three he considers most valuable for his work, particularly when beginning clinical work with patients who experience terror of death, with the aim of softening it:

a) The mortality of the soul: if we are mortal, the soul does not survive; therefore, we need not fear anything about life after death. There will be no consciousness of regrets over a finished life or fear of the gods;

b) The ultimate nothingness of death: death is nothing to us, because if the soul is mortal, it will disappear with death. What disappears causes no perception, and what is not perceived is nothing to us;

c) The symmetry argument: our state of nonbeing after death is the same as the state in which we existed before birth. The two states are identical;

At this point, it is useful to evoke Angerami's idea (2018, p. 156) that existential psychotherapy is artisanal work, constructed anew at each moment and in every therapeutic encounter. This perspective is reinforced by Yalom's observation (2008, p. 73) that some patients find Epicurus's ideas irrelevant or unsatisfactory, while others find them comforting. Even when the starting point is the same—for example, a philosopher's quotation—the artisanal

nature of psychotherapy means that therapy will unfold in a particular way according to each patient's response, because the individual's subjectivity will be shared and will become material for the psychologist's work.

It is important to emphasize the author's belief that "[...] treatment should be guided not by theory, but by the relationship" (YALOM, 2008, p. 160, our translation). Yalom (2024, p. 35) uses the idea of therapist and patient as fellow travelers to illuminate the therapeutic relationship, because both are subject to experiencing life's exhilaration as well as its darkness —disillusionment, aging, illness, isolation, loss, meaninglessness, painful choices, and death. This perspective can be deepened by adding Figueiredo's idea (1993, p. 93) of the psychologist as a "professional of encounter."

> As is well known, there is a whole humanistic discourse about "encounter." It is an eminently ideological discourse saturated with romantic and idyllic fictions. That, however, is not what is at issue here. When I propose characterizing the psychologist, in any context in which they work, as a "professional of encounter," I merely point out that dealing with the other—an individual, group, or institution—in their otherness is part of our daily activity. Even if we arrive at this encounter with the relative and very precarious security of our theories and techniques, what always matters is our openness to otherness in its dimensions as something unknown, challenging, and different; something in the other that compels us to emotional and intellectual work; something in the other that propels and reaches us; something from the other that imposes itself on and challenges us, effectively making us other than ourselves. (FIGUEIREDO, 1993, p. 93, our translation).

In each psychotherapy session, the patient is not the only person affected by the therapeutic process generated in the relationship between patient and psychologist. The professional is also traversed by the patient's subjectivity, and their own subjectivity consequently acquires new contours. Psychologists must be open to establishing a bond with the other as the other presents themselves and must welcome their otherness—that is, the unknown, challenging, and different—as Figueiredo (1995, p. 93) states. Cardella (2002, p. 90), writing from the perspective of the Gestalt approach, adds that psychotherapy is not comfortable or predictable work that gives the professional a sense of control and completion. Moreover, this confrontation with otherness should intrigue and motivate a good psychotherapist, regardless of whether their orientation is psychoanalytic, Reichian, Gestalt, or any other, because dealing with the other in their otherness is the very meaning of psychotherapeutic work.

To highlight the individual's freedom and responsibility to alter aspects of life that require change, Yalom (2008, pp. 80-91), drawing on Nietzsche, presents several of the

philosopher's ideas that he uses in sessions as catalysts for what he calls a “serious thought experiment” about how one is living:

a) “Living the same life over and over again, for all eternity”: derived from Thus Spoke Zarathustra, this presents the idea of living an identical life repeatedly throughout eternity. The phrase serves as a guide to lead patients away from concern with trivial matters and toward the goal of living;

b) “Amor fati”: create a fate you can love. The aim is not to leave clients mired in their regrets, but to direct their gaze toward the future and toward transformative questions. For example: What can you do now in your life so that, in one or five years, you will not look back and feel the same sadness about new regrets you have accumulated?;

c) “Become who you are”: Nietzsche advises us to avoid the unlived life;

d) “What does not kill me makes me stronger”: a reminder that difficult situations can strengthen a person and make them capable of adapting to adversity;

The use of these aphorisms clearly seeks to invite the patient to enter Heidegger's ontological mode—or what Yalom (2008, pp. 38-39) calls “that things are”—so that they may make changes they consider meaningful to their life in pursuit of self-fulfillment. “Human existence loses continuity through the act of dying. Death has the power to bring to an end existence's reveries, plans, and illusions. Death is the most concrete occurrence of human existence [...]” (ANGERAMI, 2018, p. 55, our translation). Once the memory of the end is summoned, the urgency to make use of today is activated.

Yet, over the course of existence, when individuals allow themselves to begin reflecting on death, they may experience a feeling that often has not been identified by name, although it has already been lived at some earlier moment in their history: death anxiety. The next section discusses what this concept actually is and how psychologists can recognize it in clinical practice, since it may appear in different ways in patients' discourse.

Anxiety is one of the principal existential concepts guiding the psychologist's work in Existential Psychology. “For existentialists, anxiety is not a negative feeling, but a valuable experience that emerges when we become aware of our human condition. Anxiety, rather, is a feeling that frightens us before existential nothingness” (ANGERAMI, 2018, p. 69, emphasis added, our translation).

The unpredictability inherent in human existence gives anxiety a multifaceted character, because it is directly related to several of an individual's existential concerns. Angerami (2018, p. 69), for example, explains three types of anxiety:

a) Anxiety of being: the feeling that emerges from a person's inability to experience the wonder of existing without thinking about absolute nothingness. This anxiety involves the totality of existence and is experienced when one thinks that nothing and no one might ever have existed, or that everything might cease to exist in an instant;

b) Anxiety before the here and now: it reflects a characteristic of the human condition. The human being is temporal; their personal history is determined by the time and space to which they are conditioned, and even if eternal objects existed, the individual could not participate in their eternity;

c) Anxiety of freedom: it arises from a person's awareness that they can choose and are responsible for their own actions;

Because freedom "[...] is the human capacity to contribute to one's own evolution" (MAY, 1987, p. 134, our translation), this possibility of choice generates anxiety, since freedom is directly related to responsibility. Erthal (2017, pp. 57-58) states that the essence of freedom is choice; however, options are limited, and one must live with the inevitable consequences of each choice. In other words, the person is not a victim, but an agent of their own fate.

Thus, the human being can be understood as "[...] a set of possibilities that may be actualized and realized during existence. The person has the freedom to make choices, lived with anxiety and uneasiness, because not everything can be chosen and many possibilities must be renounced" (CARDELLA, 2002, p. 35, emphasis added, our translation). Over time, people encounter the realization that their capacity to choose is limited because they are mortal. Accordingly, as Erthal (2017, p. 150) presents, Heidegger holds that it is before the possibility of death that a person experiences the anxiety he calls death anxiety.

Yalom (2008, p. 21) argues that each person fears death in their own way. To refer to death anxiety, he uses interchangeable terms such as "[...] 'death anxiety,' 'fear of death,' 'mortal terror,' and 'fear of finitude'" (YALOM, 1980, p. 42, our translation). Based on the concept of anxiety, Yalom (2008, pp. 22-29) identifies two possibilities for recognizing death anxiety in patients' speech:

a) Overt death anxiety: expressed directly, for example through an inability to comprehend the state of nonexistence or the inevitability of death;

b) Covert death anxiety: thoughts about death may infiltrate and permeate dreams symbolically;

The methodology used to prepare this article is addressed in the following section.

**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

## 3 Methodology and/or materials and methods

This research was structured through a literature review to define existential psychology, psychotherapeutic practice, and the concept of death anxiety from Irvin Yalom's perspective. Based on the author's theory and clinical practice, presented in Section 2, a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory methodology was developed to analyze his autobiographical narrative of confronting death within his family context, an event recorded in the book A Matter of Death and Life. The methodology for surveying, indexing, and classifying the author's quotations was based on Bardin's Content Analysis (CA) method (2016, p. 123), whose stages are: 1. pre-analysis; 2. exploration of the material; and 3. treatment of results, inference, and interpretation.

Pre-analysis, Stage 1, contains the following sub-stages: a) preliminary reading; b) selection of documents; c) formulation of hypotheses and objectives; and d) referencing of indices and development of indicators. Sub-stage (a), preliminary reading, consists of "[...] establishing contact with the documents to be analyzed and getting to know the text while allowing oneself to be permeated by impressions and orientations" (BARDIN, 2016, p. 124, our translation). The researcher had not previously read the work; therefore, preliminary reading was performed to understand the book's organization. Sub-stage (b), "selection of documents," was not applied because a single, specific work had already been chosen. This work was coauthored with Yalom's wife, Marilyn. Authorship alternates between Irvin Yalom and Marilyn Yalom, with all chapters written in the first person. From Chapter 20 onward, authorship remains with Irvin Yalom; however, in Chapter 22 he begins to report his experience of grief. Thus, for the purposes of this research, the analysis was restricted to the chapters written by Irvin Yalom through his wife's funeral: Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, and 22. In sub-stage (c), "formulation of hypotheses and objectives," the hypothesis was developed that Yalom would refer to concepts from the books used in this research: Existential Psychotherapy and Staring at the Sun. The general objective was to understand, based on Yalom's writing, possible changes in the meanings attributed to death anxiety by comparing his earlier works with writings produced during his wife's illness, from the cancer diagnosis through her death. In sub-stage (d), a system of indices was established for the Recording Units (RU) extracted from the text. The locator code comprises the capital letter "C," for chapter, followed by its number; then the capital letter "P," for page, followed by the corresponding page number; and finally the capital letters "CIT," for quotation, followed by the ordinal number of that excerpt on the page (e.g., C1P1CIT1), compiled in Appendix A. Quotations

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

were considered eligible for analysis when they presented at least one of the following characteristics: i) reflective elaboration concerning death, dying, the loss of a partner, or one's own finitude; and ii) theoretical and philosophical grounding, identified through the mention or citation of authors and concepts that underpin Yalom's existential perspective.

Subsequently, each excerpt was categorized—see Table 1—according to the theme present in the subjectivity expressed by the author in each quotation, taking into consideration several qualities presented by Bardin (2016, pp. 149-150): mutual exclusivity, whereby each element may not exist in more than one category; homogeneity, whereby there must be a single classification principle within the category; and relevance, whereby the category belongs to the selected theoretical framework.

*Table 1 - Relationship of the thematic categories of each recording unit (RU) created for the direct quotations extracted from the book A Matter of Death and Life.*

| **Classification of recording units (RU)** | |
|---|---|
| **UR** | **THEME** |
| C1P19CIT1 | Own death |
| C1P19CIT2 | Own death |
| C1P20CIT1 | Regret |
| C1P20CIT2 | Aphorism about death |
| C1P20CIT3 | Aphorism about death |
| C1P20CIT4 | Aphorism about death |
| C1P20CIT5 | Own death |
| C1P20CIT6 | Aphorism about death |
| C1P20CIT7 | Aging |
| C1P21CIT1 | Aphorism about death |
| C1P23CIT1 | Widowhood |
| C1P23CIT2 | Widowhood |
| C1P24CIT1 | Suicide |
| C1P24CIT2 | Overt death anxiety |
| C3P34CIT1 | Own death |
| C3P35CIT1 | Own death |
| C7P58CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C7P58CIT2 | Suicide |
| C7P59CIT1 | Suicide |
| C7P59CIT2 | Suicide |
| C7P60CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C7P60CIT2 | Aphorism about death |
| C7P60CIT3 | Dementia |
| C7P61CIT1 | Own death |
| C7P62CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C7P62CIT2 | Own death |
| C7P63CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C7P64CIT1 | Own death |
| C7P64CIT2 | Regret |
| C7P64CIT3 | Overt death anxiety |
| C7P65CIT1 | Widowhood |
| C7P65CIT2 | Grief |
| C7P65CIT3 | Own death |
| C7P65CIT4 | Own death |
| C9P72CIT1 | Aphorism about death |

| Classification of recording units (RU) | |
|---|---|
| **UR** | **THEME** |
| C9P72CIT2 | Finitude |
| C9P72CIT3 | Widowhood |
| C9P73CIT1 | Own death |
| C9P73CIT2 | Dementia |
| C9P73CIT3 | Dementia |
| C9P74CIT1 | Dementia |
| C9P75CIT1 | Widowhood |
| C9P75CIT2 | Widowhood |
| C11P85CIT1 | Marriage |
| C11P85CIT2 | Covert death anxiety |
| C13P96CIT1 | Career |
| C15P110CIT1 | Finitude |
| C16P106CIT1 | Denial |
| C16P107CIT1 | Own death |
| C16P108CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C16P109CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C16P109CIT2 | Grief |
| C16P110CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C16P111CIT1 | Aging |
| C16P112CIT1 | Widowhood |
| C16P112CIT2 | Self-regulation |
| C18P117CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C18P118CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C20P124CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C21P127CIT1 | Overt death anxiety |
| C22P132CIT1 | Widowhood |
| C22P132CIT2 | Aging |
| C22P134CIT1 | Own death |
| C22P134CIT2 | Covert death anxiety |
| C22P135CIT1 | Regret |

Source: Classification developed by the researcher.

The material exploration stage, Stage 2, as Bardin (2016) states, essentially consists of coding, decomposition, and enumeration operations according to the rules established in the preceding stage. In the third and final stage, treatment of results, inference, and interpretation, the researcher interpreted the results in light of the adopted theoretical framework: the works of Yalom (1980, 2008, 2024), Angerami (2018), and Erthal (2017). Interpretations were also developed from the researcher's perspective as a Psychology student who identifies reflection on finitude as a relevant object of investigation for resignifying human experience. Finally, Papalia and Martorell (2021) were used to contextualize the stage of the life cycle in which Yalom found himself while writing A Matter of Death and Life.

## 4 Analysis of results

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

A Matter of Death and Life covers a period that began in April and continued until 125 days after Marilyn Yalom's death in November, when she underwent assisted death by ingesting medication in the presence of a physician specializing in the field. According to Papalia and Martorell (2021, p. 92), the stage of life in which Yalom[7] experienced this event is the period of human development called late adulthood (beginning at age 65), which has many characteristics, including the possibility of memory deterioration, enjoyment of retirement, and the development of more flexible strategies for coping with personal losses and impending death. The book clearly reveals other challenges that Yalom faced simultaneously, beyond his partner's death, such as the onset of signs of dementia, his retirement, and reflections on his own death.

Thus, 15 themes emerged from the 65 indexed excerpts of accounts shared by Yalom over these months. The six most frequent were overt death anxiety (13), one's own death (13), widowhood (8), aphorisms about death (7), suicide (4), and dementia (4), totaling 75.4% of the direct quotations. Although the book was a “diary,” as Yalom and Yalom (2021, p. 13) called it in the preface, the work was intended for publication from its inception. Therefore, it was expected to contain, beyond its thematic axis, an interface with Yalom's theoretical framework, on which the chapter content was based.

The theme of overt death anxiety, corresponding to 20% of the indexed excerpts, was extensively expressed and categorically developed in the text. Examples include C7P60CIT1: “For so many years I have struggled to comfort my patients who struggled with death anxiety. Now it is my turn. Can Staring at the Sun help me? Can I find comfort in my own words?” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 60, emphasis added, our translation); C18P117CIT1: “Marilyn's illness heightens my awareness of my own mortality” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 117, our translation); C20P124CIT1: “There is no doubt that she feels far less anxiety about death (and less anxiety in general) than I do [...]” (YALOM, 2021, p. 124, our translation); and C1P24CIT2: “John was a close friend with severe dementia who recently died in a nearby nursing home. The last time I visited him, he did not recognize me, [...] it is my death nightmare” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 24, emphasis added, our translation). Because Yalom is an existential psychotherapist and the author of a work specifically addressing death anxiety, he turned his clinical gaze upon himself; his ability to directly identify his own death anxiety in his thoughts was condensed in the text. This process enriched the work because, in addition to

[7] When the surname Yalom appears outside the standard form of a direct or indirect bibliographic reference, it refers to Irvin Yalom. Direct quotations from Marilyn Yalom were not used in this study; she is always mentioned by her first name. The work A Matter of Death and Life, however, was coauthored by the couple (YALOM; YALOM, 2021).

presenting personal examples of death anxiety, it humanized the psychotherapist's image. Possessing deep knowledge about existential concerns common to all human beings, and having helped many people who underwent psychotherapy with him, did not exempt him from life's pain; it provided no shield. However, the tools psychology can provide appeared in his accounts through his critical judgment and attention to identifying and working through the content of his thoughts.

Knowledge about death anxiety does not exempt anyone from avoiding it, but it facilitates recognition. Clarity about one's thoughts during moments of emotional suffering, such as the declining health of a family member, can enhance one's capacity to analyze situations in the here and now in a more humane and realistic way, so as to understand another person's point of view and behavior. This is illustrated in quotation C16P112CIT2, whose theme is self-regulation, after a dialogue with his wife in which she expressed concern about how he would live after her death: “[...] Suppose I were the one dying and Marilyn were caring for me lovingly, as she always has? [...] Would I be worried about how Marilyn would fare without me? Absolutely! [...] An instant therapeutic thought. I already feel much better” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 112, our translation).

This internal dialogue can also be identified at another moment, in August, while he was reading his own book Staring at the Sun. In item C7P65CIT2, concerning grief, the author stated that “[...] Once we have gone through the yearly cycle twice, almost all of us will have returned to life. That is what I wrote, but I doubt it will work that way for me” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 65, emphasis added, our translation). Three months later, in November, Yalom displayed a different stance toward his possible grief, after assisted death had begun to be discussed among his wife's physician, his wife, and himself, in item C16P109CIT2:

> I have worked with so many bereaved spouses who eventually improved—I know it is slow, between one and two years—but it will happen. Even so, I sabotage my efforts to comfort myself by immediately focusing on my many burdens—my age, my memory problems, my physical problems, especially my balance problems, which make it difficult to walk without a cane or walker. But I have a quick reply for this gloomy self: Irv, my God—look at your advantages: your knowledge of the mind and how much you know about overcoming painful times. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 109, emphasis added, our translation).

Yalom's coping strategies for the suffering he experienced in the present emerged through analysis of previous situations he had resolved, such as his clinical cases. This behavior supported his recognition of his own capacity to resolve critical situations. Theoretical

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

knowledge of a subject offers an initial perspective, a starting point for developing a solution, although a real situation requires unprecedented resources. They are unprecedented because, when an event such as the possible death of someone arises, other factors cut across the way the individual faces it—for example, whether the person is dealing with a health problem or is emotionally stable or unstable because they recently experienced another delicate situation.

Moreover, it would have been impossible for the author to pass through this landmark in his personal life without reflecting on his own death (20% of the excerpts), because, as Yalom (1980, pp. 8-9) defines it, death is the most evident ultimate concern: a central conflict originates in the tension between awareness of death's inevitability and the desire to continue existing. Confronting someone's mortality, especially that of someone one loves, automatically reveals one's own mortality and the universal, irrevocable human condition of being subject to time. It is relevant to note that Yalom's confrontation with the approach of his death was expressed poetically, in keeping with his writing style, and also with clear recognition that this possibility would occur: “[...] Again and again, I forget my age and that my earliest colleagues and friends are all dead and that I am next in line. [...]” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 64, our translation).

Yalom's unalarmed stance toward the realization of his own death can be understood through elements of the philosophy that guided his clinical practice, such as Nietzsche's aphorism, “[...] amor fati (love your fate): in other words, create the fate you can love” (YALOM, 2008, p. 86, our translation). His conclusion that he had no regrets was reported at the very beginning of the first chapter; see index C1P20CIT1:

> We feel that we have lived life fully. Of all the ideas I have used to comfort patients who feared death, none was more powerful than the idea of living a life without regret. Marilyn and I feel free of regret; we lived fully and courageously. We took care not to let opportunities for knowledge pass us by, and now little unlived life remains. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 19, emphasis added, our translation).

When facing clinical conditions whose outcome may be one's own death or another's, people commonly reflect on what their life has been, their achievements, and regrets about what they failed to accomplish for themselves or in relation to the other. Feelings such as melancholy may surface; according to Angerami (2003, p. 151), melancholy arises from situations in which the person suffers over what they did not live. At this point, reflecting on death from time to time, during periods when life is free from illness and other suffering, is an effective tool for self-preparation through analysis of one's choices and an understanding of one's motivations

and limitations as a being subject to time and required to make choices and move forward while carrying their consequences and renunciations. The absence of this recurring analysis in an individual's life can perpetuate this feeling, because:

> Melancholy is most often associated with an intense process of guilt, because it returns the patient to the uncertainties that afflict the soul when we make our choices throughout life. Existentially, we are always indebted to someone. Thus, no matter how hard I strive to fulfill the role of father, I will always think I could have been an even better father. The same occurs in my experience of the roles of son, husband, friend, professor, and so forth. Guilt, so to speak, is an inherent part of the human condition. (ANGERAMI, 2003, p. 160, emphasis added, our translation).

The idea of having a life that is truly understood and lived, based on an honest view of one's own death, as May (1986, p. 81) states, can be understood through the prism of regret. When individuals recognize the facticity that time is running out in their own existence and in that of others, they commonly come, over the years, to value moments together and make choices more consciously. Thus, it is essential to deconstruct within oneself the taboo surrounding death, because death takes on other nuances of interpretation depending on the culture. By reducing this distance from and discomfort with the idea of death, an individual can create more space to choose consciously and authentically. When reminded of mortality, decisions acquire different contours of importance and priorities can be reformulated—for example, devoting more time to family and friends instead of working so intensely that one's availability to cultivate interpersonal relationships is compromised.

The methodology used Yalom's philosophically grounded statements as a predefined criterion for extracting direct quotations, identified through mentions or citations of authors and concepts underpinning his existential perspective, because his use of philosophical aphorisms as an entry point for patients to reflect on a subject was recognized as a clinical resource. Of the indexed direct quotations, seven were philosophical aphorisms about death, emerging from self-reflections on subjects such as regret (C1P20CIT1) and aging (C1P20CIT7). From these thoughts, Yalom and Yalom (2021, p. 20) recalled statements by philosophers such as Seneca and Nietzsche that shaped their view of life, including “die at the right time” (C1P20CIT5) and “what has become perfect is what has become mature” (C1P20CIT6). These excerpts exemplify philosophy's support as an instrument for resignifying an event—a lens through which the individual can observe the situation in which they are immersed.

Yalom (2008, p. 69) stated that ideas have power and that the insights of great thinkers who shaped human history help master disturbing thoughts about death and discover

meaningful paths through life. This strategy of facing reality through philosophy led him to reread Staring at the Sun and reassess the truth, for him, of several aphorisms contained in the book. This point is crucial because it revealed clear acceptance of the inevitability of his own death, while also revealing death anxiety regarding the possibility of dying without his partner's presence, as shown in the following excerpt:

> Today I do not suffer excessively from death anxiety—that is, anxiety about my own death. My true anxiety comes from the thought of losing Marilyn forever. Sometimes, for a moment, I feel a flash of resentment that she has the privilege of dying first. It seems so much easier that way. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 72, emphasis added, our translation).

This statement reveals one of Yalom's four ultimate concerns (1980, pp. 8-9): existential isolation. Every human being enters existence alone and must leave it alone. Although the bond between Yalom and his wife is evident in this adverse situation, making them partners in the search for a solution to the problem, a characteristic of human nature appears indisputably: each person dies alone, even when comfort is provided by someone holding the dying person's hand. Widowhood therefore emerged as a theme in Yalom's reflections. He states: “[...] Strangely, I feel no terror about my death. Instead, my terror comes from the thought of life without Marilyn” (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 65, our translation). This subject was expected, since the case concerned the death of a spouse.

It is nevertheless important to address the life of the person who remains when someone they love dies. People commonly say that “the person will depart” or “the person will pass on”; however, for someone who is about to lose a loved one, the predominant perspective is often that of someone who will be left behind, remain alone and need to continue the journey, and learn to live in a new world—a world without the person they love. At this point, the individual may face fear of the unknown, uncertainty about how life will be reorganized, loneliness, and even guilt, as reflected respectively in indices C9P75CIT2 and C16P112CIT1:

> I imagine my life after Marilyn's death, and I imagine night after night living alone in my large, empty house. I have many friends, children and grandchildren, even a great-grandchild, and thoughtful, kind neighbors, but they lack Marilyn's magic. The task of enduring this fundamental solitude seems overwhelming. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 75, emphasis added, our translation).

> When I think of life without Marilyn, the pain and anxiety increase. My mind is acting primitively: it is as though thinking about my future without Marilyn were a betrayal—a treacherous act that might hasten her death. “Treacherous” seems the right word: when I make plans for my life after Marilyn's death, it

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

> feels like betrayal. I should be completely consumed by her, by our past, by how we spend our time with each other now, and by our very brief future. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 112, emphasis added, our translation).

When faced with the possible death of someone one loves, a person may also entertain thoughts of suicide. No human being is exempt, because of latent pain, from thinking about anticipating their condition of nonbeing; that is conceivable. Although this was the point that stood out most strongly to the researcher, it also most clearly demonstrated Yalom's humanity and honesty as a psychotherapist and writer. The theme once again shows that theoretical knowledge of an existential issue does not protect a person from generating destructive thoughts; however, attention is directed toward those thoughts as a self-protective mechanism. For example, index C1P24CIT1 states:

> Cyanide capsules were distributed to all the leading Nazis (Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, Bormann), and many died in the same way. That was seventy-five years ago! What about now? Where can one obtain a cyanide capsule today? But I do not ponder these questions long before the obvious dark consequences appear: the impact of my death on my children and our entire network of friends. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 59, emphasis added, our translation).

The conceptual framework of Viktor E. Frankl's Logotherapy offers an interesting basis for thinking about meaning in life. The author named his theory Logotherapy because “The term ‘logos’ is a Greek word and means ‘meaning’! Logotherapy [...] focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as the person's search for that meaning” (FRANKL, 2025, p. 156, our translation). Accordingly, he defends the following perspective:

> I doubt that a physician can answer this question in general terms. The meaning of life differs from person to person, from day to day, and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. Posing the question in general terms would be comparable to asking a chess champion: “Tell me, master, what is the best move in the world?” There simply is no such thing as the best move, or even a good move, apart from a specific situation in a game and the opponent's particular personality. The same is true of human existence. (FRANKL, 2025, p. 168, emphasis added, our translation).

Thus, once an individual is transported into the ontological mode, structures are touched and reviewed. These include social roles—being a husband, wife, father, mother, son, or daughter—that cease to exist; responsibilities that must be redistributed within the family; ways of seeing life that are confirmed, disappear, or change; and the meaning of life that is questioned. The search for a reason supporting the continued existence of the person who will

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

soon be bereaved becomes the object of self-reflection. In addition to considering the impact of his death on his children and network of friends, Yalom also sought refuge in his professional commitment; see index C7P59CIT2:

> And what about my patients? For so many years I worked in individual and group therapy with widows and widowers, and I dedicated myself to keeping them alive during that painful first year, sometimes two years, after their spouse's death. I often smiled with pleasure as I watched them gradually improve and begin life again. Ending my own life would be a betrayal of their work, of our work. I helped them survive the pain and suffering and then, when confronted with their situation, I choose to flee. No, I cannot do that. Helping my patients lies at the core of my life: it is something I cannot and will not violate. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 59, emphasis added, our translation).

Another Logotherapy concept that contributes to understanding the individual who suffers while facing a family member's imminent death is the meaning of suffering, which, from Frankl's perspective (2025, p. 173), can be understood as follows: “When we are no longer able to change a situation—we may think of an incurable illness, such as cancer that can no longer be operated on—we are challenged to change ourselves” (our translation). The individual is invited to develop a new perspective through which to look beyond their pain at the adverse situation. This idea can be illustrated by Yalom's elaboration during the process of accepting his wife's death at three moments. Index C16P106CIT1, whose theme is denial, follows their first conversation with the physician responsible for the assisted-death procedure:

> He tells us that he has participated in more than a hundred such deaths and wholeheartedly agrees with the choice whenever the patient is in great pain and has no hope of recovery. These words have a powerfully calming effect on Marilyn—on both of us—but, at the same time, make her death more real. Marilyn will die soon. Marilyn will die soon. Marilyn will die soon. That thought is too much for me, and I keep pushing it away. Denial reigns. I avert my eyes. I will not, will not face it. (YALOM, 2021, p. 106, emphasis added, our translation).

The presence of denial when confronting the idea of death is expected. Based on her professional experience in hospitals, Kübler-Ross (2017) presented the classic stages through which terminal patients and their families pass when confronting death: 1. denial and isolation; 2. anger; 3. bargaining; 4. depression; and 5. acceptance.

> Denial is commonly a temporary defense and is soon replaced by partial acceptance. [...] In short, the patient's first reaction may be a temporary state of shock from which they gradually recover. [...] Because we are all immortal

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

> in our unconscious, it is almost inconceivable to recognize that we too must face death. (KÜBLER-ROSS, 2017, pp. 45-47, emphasis added, our translation).

Because Existential Psychology aims to enable individuals to manage themselves, as Erthal (2017, p. 80) states, this attitude of self-regulation can again be observed in Yalom; see index C16P107CIT1:

> This is not the first time I have heard these words. But perhaps it is the first time I have allowed them to penetrate my mind. Perhaps, for the first time, I truly understand that if I had gone through during the last ten months what Marilyn went through, I would be feeling exactly the same way! If I had lived with so much anguish, I would be welcoming death, just as Marilyn does. (YALOM; YALOM, 2021, p. 107, emphasis added, our translation).

Prior reflection on death as an event inherent in life, at times when one is not confronting one's own mortality or that of another person, enables individuals to assess and ground their premises concerning the mortal wound without urgency. Yalom's example shows his capacity to reassess his perspective by understanding and interpreting the situation from the other's point of view. Certain situations, such as having a family member with terminal cancer, in a coma, or in a vegetative state, may demand a new way of looking at the situation. Since death is part of life, why cling to the thought that the other person cannot die? Or cannot die at that moment? Often, at times like these, people encounter their inability to accept life's transience, the other's impermanence, and the presence of an absence that will soon become real.

Finally, among Yalom's reflections, the author also referred to his health condition at the time: dementia. “For a long time I had feared dementia more than death” (YALOM, 2021, p. 74, our translation); see index C9P74CIT1. It is important to address this emerging theme because, after losing someone, one of the resources still available to the bereaved, beyond technology, is memory itself. The deceased family member is preserved and becomes immortal in the memory of the bereaved person while that person continues to live. Yalom's concern with his cognitive limitation creates room for reflection by the bereaved on the future without the other, as well as on their own current health until the time of their death.

The person encounters a more realistic view of reality, without idealization, and encounters the fear of continuing without the person who will die. It is a future that instinctively begins to be constructed in the imagination. The person also analyzes their own resources, especially physical ones, as though estimating the distance between themselves and their own death. Their health remains in focus. Their gaze also surveys their surroundings—who else remains, and who will form their support network during the even more painful moment to

come. The other's death is like the announcement of a violent approaching storm, and human beings instinctively recognize and gather their resources, join forces with others, and seek shelter.

## 5 Final considerations

The development of this research enabled an understanding of the theoretical framework that delineates Existential Psychology, its psychotherapeutic objective, and fundamental existential concepts, including death. Although death is a concept whose contours are difficult to visualize, it was possible to define it based on Brazilian authors as well as international references. In this context, the concept of death—the mortal wound—guided the understanding of how an individual, during existence, can be transported from the everyday mode to the ontological mode.

The literature review made it possible to understand the dimensions of anxiety by presenting its typology with examples such as anxiety of freedom, anxiety of being, anxiety before the here and now, and death anxiety, the last of which may be overt or hidden in the symbolism of patients' dreams. Part of Irvin Yalom's epistemology was presented through Existential Psychotherapy, especially the four ultimate concerns of his theory: death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. His trajectory from medical residency to his encounter with Philosophy and Rollo May's work was also discussed. The philosophical foundations structuring Yalom's clinical practice were examined and illustrated with aphorisms by Nietzsche, Epicurus, and Seneca.

The chapters written by Irvin Yalom in A Matter of Death and Life were analyzed, including his reflections on what he was experiencing from his wife's cancer diagnosis, through Marilyn Yalom's decision to pursue assisted death, and finally the death of his partner. Themes emerging from his accounts included overt death anxiety, one's own death, widowhood, aphorisms about death, suicide, and dementia.

The importance of the Existential Psychology perspective in constructing an individual's subjectivity when facing a delicate and painful situation, such as the possible death of a family member, was established. The emergence of negative and pessimistic thoughts is inevitable, given a human nature that encompasses feelings such as melancholy, fear, and anger, as well as denial as a defense against suffering. However, interpretation of reality can be shaped by the author's attentive gaze: equipped with theoretical existential knowledge, he identified critical

points in his own elaboration and confronted himself, resulting in an adaptation of his view from another perspective on the same event.

It was concluded that prior and regular reflection on death did not shield the author from feeling the pain of the situation, but it allowed him to experience it without unfamiliarity regarding the possibility of his wife's death. This did not make the situation easy, but it led to an attitude that was more receptive than defensive toward an inevitable circumstance of life. Viewing death as a fact of life—an irrevocable and impartial event that meets every existence, which is the realistic view of death—facilitated the author's journey during the moments when he was transported into the ontological mode. Deconstructing the distance from death predominantly popularized in Western culture, together with his theoretical and tacit repertoire concerning Existential Psychology, helped Yalom during that period.

As a limitation of this research, Marilyn Yalom's perspective—as the person who experienced cancer and decided to undergo assisted death—was not analyzed. Such an analysis would provide a complementary view of death anxiety from the perspective of a terminally ill person who possessed knowledge of existential concepts through life with her husband, an existential psychotherapist. It may also be noted that Irvin Yalom's period of grief was not explored; thus, the actual experience and confrontation of solitude and widowhood were not analyzed in their entirety. The research extended only to his perspective while imagining the future.

Future studies might explore a terminally ill person's death anxiety when deciding on assisted death and the existential concerns at work in that context. The relationship between death anxiety and melancholy in the exercise of choosing assisted death could also be studied, including how an individual's subjectivity regarding their finitude develops before this reality.

## References

ANGERAMI, Valdemar Augusto. Psicoterapia existencial: noções básicas. Artesã, 2018.

_____, Valdemar Augusto. Temas existenciais em psicoterapia. Cengage Learning Edições Ltda., 2003.

BARDIN, Laurence. Análise de conteúdo. São Paulo: Edições 70, 2016.

BECK, Judith S. Terapia cognitivo-comportamental: teoria e prática. 3. ed. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2022.

CARDELLA, Beatriz Helena Paranhos. A construção do psicoterapeuta: uma abordagem gestáltica. Summus Editorial, 2002.

DE FIGUEIREDO, Ângela Leggerini et al. O uso da psicoeducação no tratamento do transtorno bipolar. Revista Brasileira de Terapia Comportamental e Cognitiva, [s. l.], v. 11, n. 1, p. 15-24, 2009.

DIONIZIO, Mayara. J. . Fenomenologia, existencialismo e humanismo. Fundamentos da psicologia humanista. Matrizes do pensamento IV: fenomenologia existencial e humanista. 1. ed. Porto Alegre: Sagah, 2022. p. 13-27.

EPICTETO, D. E. A Arte de Viver. São Paulo: Camelot, 2023.

ERTHAL, Tereza Cristina Saldanha. Trilogia da existência: teoria e prática da psicoterapia vivencial. Curitiba, Appris, 2017.

FIGUEIREDO, Luís Cláudio. Sob o signo da multiplicidade. Estudos de Psicologia (Campinas), v. 10, n. 1, p. 11-19, 1993.

FRANKL, Viktor E. Sobre o sentido da vida. Editora Vozes, 2025.

KÜBLER-ROSS, Elisabeth. Sobre a morte e o morrer: O que os doentes terminais têm para ensinar a médicos, enfermeiras, religiosos e aos seus próprios parentes. WWF Martins Fontes, 2017.

MAY, Rollo. O homem à procura de si mesmo. 13. ed. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987.

_____. Psicologia Existencial. 4. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Globo, 1986.

OLIVEIRA, R. C. R. P. Fundamentos da psicologia humanista. Matrizes do pensamento IV: fenomenologia existencial e humanista. 1. ed. Porto Alegre: Sagah, 2022. p. 75-86.

PAPALIA, Diane E.; MARTORELL, Gabriela. Desenvolvimento Humano. 14 ed. McGraw Hill Brasil, 2021.

ROGERS, Carl R. Tornar-se pessoa. Tradução de Manuel José do Carmo Ferreira. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2009.

SÊNECA. Sobre a brevidade da vida. São Paulo: Camelot, 2025.

WRIGHT, J. H.; BASCO, M. R.; THASE, M. E. Aprendendo a terapia cognitivo comportamental. 2. ed. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2019.

YALOM, Irvin. De frente para o sol. Agir Editora, 2008.

_____. Existential Psychotherapy. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

_____. Os desafios da terapia: uma carta aberta para uma nova geração de terapeutas e seus pacientes. 2. ed. atual. Fontanar, 2024. (Obra original publicada em 2002).

_____; LESZCZ, Molyn. Psicoterapia de grupo: teoria e prática. 2006. p. 528-528.

RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O
Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
**Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/08/2026 | aceito: 11/08/2026 | publicação: 14/08/2026**

_____; YALOM, Marilyn. Uma questão de Vida e Morte: amor, perda e o que realmente importa no final. Paidós, 2021.