Instructor’s Manual
for
EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC THERAPY
WITH
JAMES BUGENTAL, PHD

from the series
PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH THE EXPERTS

with hosts
Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD & Diane Kjos, PhD

by
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Instructor’s Manual for

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during the video and post-viewing.

Interspersed throughout the session transcript, you will find commentaries elucidating Bugental’s interventions and responses at key moments in the session. You may copy the transcripts for student or group training purposes and pass them out to viewers for their own study and for use in a class.

2. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions provide ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. LET IT FLOW
Allow the session to play out some so viewers can appreciate the work over time instead of stopping the video too often. It is best to watch the video in its entirety since issues untouched in earlier parts often play out later. Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What do viewers think works and does not work in the session? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes and it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Suggestions for Further Readings and Websites prior to viewing. You can also time the video to coincide with other course or training materials on related topics.
5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER

See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

6. ROLE-PLAY IDEAS

The Setup: After watching the video, organize participants into groups of three. Assign each group to role-play a psychotherapy session following Bugental’s Existential-Humanistic model. Each role-play shall consist of one therapist, one client and one observer. Therapists should focus their attention and comments largely on the clients’ process, as opposed to content. Examples of process include facial expression, body language and other non-verbal cues, intonation, timbre, pattern of speech, degree to which client appears engaged or present, implied attitude towards self, use of qualifiers such as “maybe,” or “I guess,” and any other manifestations of client resistance. Therapists may also want to practice helping clients to engage in what Bugental refers to as “searching,” which involves focusing inward and sharing as much as possible their full range of immediate awareness, including feelings, bodily sensations, images, thoughts, and concerns. Here therapists should give clients specific instructions on searching, and follow up a few times to facilitate deepening the inward focus, finding language or metaphors which assist in this process. After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. First have the clients share what the session was like for them, then the therapists, and then ask for the comments from the observers. Focusing on process can also be broken down into more specific elements, as is done below.

Break the Process Down: Learning to focus on process is a difficult skill for most therapists to acquire, and will certainly not be mastered in one role-play. A good way for students and trainees to practice is to break down process commentary into more discrete components. Try the following series of exercises: Using the triads described above, have the therapists only comment upon clients’ facial expressions. For example, they might say things such as “You smiled when you said that,” or “You just blushed,” or “Your eyes look sad.”
Next have the therapists only comment upon clients’ body language or movement. For example, “You took a big sigh there,” or “You kind of collapse as you say that,” or “You suddenly seem more energized.”

Now only allow commentary on voice, such as “Your voice is very soft now,” or “Your voice is flat, monotonic,” or “Your voice gets loud when you talk about your dad.”

**Debrief:** After the role-plays have been completed, reconvene as a large group, and open up a general discussion on what was learned about both the practical and emotional aspects of doing therapy from an Existential-Humanistic orientation. Was it difficult for participants to focus on process? What did they discover doing this? How did this differ from how they typically interact with clients? Having some fun with this process can make the role-play an enjoyable and learning experience.

**Alternative Role-Play Format:** Another alternative is to do all of this in front of the group with just one therapist and client; the entire group can observe before discussing the interaction. After a while, the facilitator or another participant may jump in as the therapist if the therapist reaches an impasse. Follow up with a discussion that explores what works and does not work with this model.

7. **WATCH THE SERIES**

This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application. Each video in the series presents a master therapist working with a real client who has real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Experts series (See the More Videos section for a complete list of the videos in the series), you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.

**More Videos with this Client:** In this video, Dr. Bugental works with a client named Gina. Gina is featured as a client in two other videos in this Experts series:

- *Feminist Therapy with Lenore Walker, EdD*
- *Adlerian Therapy with Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD.*
It can be particularly enlightening for viewers to watch these three therapists work with the same client to see how their styles, personalities and theoretical orientations play out differently. If you have viewers write a Reaction Paper – see number 5, above – you can ask them to address what differences they notice in how Bugental, Walker and Carlson work with Gina, and how these differences affect the outcomes of the sessions.

Other videos in the series use different therapeutic models. We can reflect upon the differences among these models by exploring the following questions:

• How does the model explain the therapeutic process?
• What assumptions does the model imply about the purpose of therapy?
• How is theory translated into practice in real-life situations?
• What is the role of the therapist?
• What outcomes are associated with successful therapy?

8. PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists or clients in videos may be nervous, putting their best foot forward, or trying to show mistakes and how to deal with them. Therapists may also move more quickly than is typical in everyday practice to demonstrate a technique. The personal style of a therapist is often as important as their techniques and theories. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, participants must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

*A NOTE ON PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Because this video contains an actual therapy session, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the client who has courageously shared her personal life with us.
Bugental’s Approach to Existential-Humanistic Therapy

As the name implies, Bugental’s approach incorporates an existential orientation, with a particular focus on clients’ immediate experience of their own existence. It also includes a humanistic outlook, holding the conviction that individuals have greater resources and potential for fuller living than they generally are aware, or take advantage of.

You will see in the video that Bugental hones in on the subjective experience of the client in the present moment. First he invites the client to look inward, breathe deeply, and “check in” with herself. This is the first step of what Bugental refers to as searching or the search process, which involves bringing our awareness to what is alive inside of us at any given moment. This is more than just paying attention to our feelings, and may also include thoughts, fantasies, images, body sensations, and the like. Of course, as with many therapeutic instructions, this is not as easy as it sounds! Clients (as well as therapists), often have a great deal of difficulty really tuning in. Thus Bugental often explicitly instructs his clients on searching, presenting it as a skill that needs to be learned over time to make full use of the psychotherapy experience.

A central aspect of existential-humanistic psychotherapy is the conceptualization and clinical techniques for dealing with client resistance. Clients are not seen as being resistant to the therapy or to the therapist—as is the case in many orientations—but rather resistant to being fully present with themselves, and the world at large. Bugental has coined the phrase self-and-world-construct to describe the pattern of resistances and coping mechanisms that each of us develops, and uses the metaphor of a space suit to help illustrate this: an astronaut’s space suit is absolutely necessary for survival, and yet at the same time is limiting.

The existential-humanistic therapist thus is constantly on the lookout for patterns of resistance that prevent clients from living more fully or engaging with others in more satisfying and authentic relationships.
Many of these patterns are revealed in the client’s process rather than the content. Bugental attends to subtle nuances in the client’s behavior and communication as manifest in the therapy hour, and gently and persistently reflects this back to the client—always keeping an eye and ear out for incongruencies between content and process. For example, a client may be smiling while speaking of events that are distressful, or conversely speak about a joyful experience in a monotone, detached voice. In these examples, Bugental is likely to note the smiling, or the monotone voice.

The goal of such process comments is to help clients increase awareness of their own experience, including restrictive patterns and habits, so they can access more of themselves, make choices about their feelings and behavior (rather than being on automatic pilot), and ultimately live life more fully.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: Existential-Humanistic Therapy with James Bugental, PhD

• **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.

• **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards, or use the questions as a way to approach the discussion. Respond to each question below.

• **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Existential-Humanistic therapy? What stands out in how Bugental works?

2. **What I found most helpful:** What was most beneficial to you as a therapist about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/strategies did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working? Explore these questions.

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently than Bugental in the therapy session in the video? Be specific in what different approaches, strategies and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy in the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Suggestions for Further Readings, Websites and Videos

BOOKS


WEB RESOURCES

Psychotherapy.net interview with James Bugental, PhD, an excerpt from his book, *Psychotherapy Isn’t What You Think*, and several related articles

www.psychotherapy.net

Association for Humanistic Psychology

www.ahpweb.org

International Network on Personal Meaning

www.meaning.ca

Irvin Yalom’s website

www.yalom.com

Louis Hoffman’s Existential therapy website

http://existential-therapy.com

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

*Adlerian Therapy with Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD*

*Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy in Action*

–James Bugental, PhD

*Feminist Therapy with Lenore Walker, EdD*

*Irvin Yalom: Live Case Consultation*

*James Bugental: Live Case Consultation*

*Rollo May on Existential Psychotherapy*

*The Gift of Therapy: A Conversation with Irvin Yalom, MD*

*Understanding Group Psychotherapy, Volume 3: An Interview*

–Irvin Yalom, MD

*additional videos featuring the same client working with therapists from different theoretical orientations.*
Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use a few or all of these discussion questions keyed to certain elements of the video or those issues most relevant to the viewers. Questions highlighting specific points in the session include the dialogue location number after the name of Bugental or Gina, for example, Bugental–9, or Bugental–34. Other questions will be more general, having to do with a theme that cuts across larger section of the work.

BUGENTAL’S APPROACH

1. **The Approach:** What stands out as most important to you in Bugental’s initial discussion of his approach: its development, application, limitations and unique strengths?

PSYCHOTHERAPY SESSION

2. **Beginning:** What do you notice about the way Bugental begins the session with Gina? What do you think of bypassing typical informational questions, but rather encouraging her to “breathe inside” and go into her center? What might be challenging for you about working with a new client in this way?

3. **Gina’s Laughter:** Bugental quickly brings attention to Gina’s laughter. What is your reaction to him doing this? What effect do you think this has on Gina? How do you feel about him making process-oriented comments so early in the session? (Bugental 9, 19, 34).

4. **“I Guess…Probably”:** What reactions do you have to Bugental noting Gina’s use of “I guess” and “probably”? What do you think his intentions are? Are these comments effective? How do you see Gina reacting to them? How do you think you might react as a client? (Bugental 22-32, 58).

5. **Crying:** What do you think about the series of interactions between Gina and Bugental that address her self-mocking and her crying? How would you describe what Bugental is doing in this piece of the therapy? What about his approach makes this therapeutic for Gina? (Bugental 62-74)
6. **Stay with That:** Bugental asks Gina to “stay with that,” (Bugental -91) “stay in there,” or “see what’s percolating in there” (Bugental – 114) several times throughout the session. What stands out for you about the statements he chooses to comment on and then asks her to go deeper into herself? Is there some kind of common thread you can pull out, or any generalizations you can make that might help you recognize when to intervene with clients in this way?

7. **Process Comments:** Bugental continues to focus more on the client’s process in the session than he does on content. What are other examples of where he focuses on process? Can you imagine making similar process comments as a therapist? Why or why not? In general, how do you understand the difference between content and process in a therapy session?

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

8. **Personal Reaction:** How would you feel about being Bugental’s client? Do you feel he could create an alliance with you and that the therapy would be effective? How so?

9. **Key Moments:** What are some key moments in this therapy? What stands out about them for you? Describe Bugental’s role in those moments? What was his part in making that a key moment?

10. **Alliance:** Bugental states, “My alliance was not with the Gina that was presented, but the Gina that was inside trying to get out.” What does this mean to you? What is significant for you about Bugental’s perspective here in terms of the therapeutic alliance? How would you characterize the therapeutic relationship in this video?

11. **Alive:** Bugental says that he is not interested in things about this person, but what is alive, living in this person in this moment. How does this core therapeutic value fit with the way you work? When you reflect on your own therapy with clients, how might it shift or alter if you were coming from the position Bugental describes here?

12. **Take-Away:** What useful ideas or approaches will you take away with you from watching this session with Bugental and Gina?
Complete Transcript of Existential-Humanistic Therapy with Dr. James Bugental

Note to facilitators: You will find chapter markers on the DVD at five-minute intervals so that you may easily skip to desired points in the video. Throughout the pre-session discussion section of the transcript below, Bugental’s Approach, we indicate on-screen minute markers that correspond with those that appear at the bottom right corner of the video on screen. In the transcript of the session itself, use the numbered entries to draw attention to desired points within the dialogue.

We have inserted commentaries throughout the therapy session transcript to highlight certain aspects of Bugental’s approach and technique.

BUGENTAL’S APPROACH

1–1

**Jon Carlson:** Diane, what’s your understanding of existential humanistic theory?

**Diane Kjos:** Well, first of all the existential part of it, I think, is more of a philosophy about how things are or how life should be, rather than a specific approach to therapy or a specific model. Humanistic, of course, recognizes the individuality of the person, and would be similar to, say, Adlerian or something like that.

**Carlson:** I guess it’s my understanding that it’s more of a growth or a health-oriented approach. It stays away from sickness and disease, and it recognizes that each person has their own specific purpose, or their own specific direction, and it’s the therapist’s task to try to enter in and understand that client’s world without really upsetting it or without changing it or disrupting it. How does it compare to these other theories? You know, you said Adlerian. What about the others?
**Kjos:** I think probably it’s most often associated or similar to person-centered in the humanistic understanding and in the not changing the individual’s experience so that there’s a lot of similarity to person-centered in that sense.

**Carlson:** Maybe we ought to bring in our guest and really find out about existential humanistic-theory. I’d like to invite Jim Bugental. Jim, join us?

**James Bugental:** Thank you

**Kjos:** Good morning.

**Bugental:** Good morning, Diane.

**Carlson:** Diane and I have been having a discussion about existential humanist theory. Can you help us understand it?

**Bugental:** I’ll try. Let me start with… As you said it, there is no article. Not “an” or “the” existential humanistic theory. Brings back, when I did my first book, I titled it The Search for Authenticity: The Existential Analytic Approach to Psychotherapy. I sent it to my friend Rollo May for comments on the manuscript and he gave me some very helpful comments, but he made one strong suggestion: change “the” to “an.” An Existential Humanistic… or An Existential Analytic. The point being that there is no one existential humanistic. There are a lot of different takes on that, and the one I speak from is usually known as existential humanistic. It’s sometimes called just existential, and so on. We use existential to convey that the main focus of our concern is existence. The fact that we are, that we live, that we are aware of our living. We don’t talk about a basic sex drive, or a big drive for power, or something like that. Those certainly exist, but they are not the core issue of life. The core issue of life is life itself.

**Kjos:** It’s “being.”

**Bugental:** What are you doing with the fact that you’re alive?

**Carlson:** That’s the existential part. What about the humanistic part?
Bugental: Well, it’s our conviction that each person has a great deal more potential for living fully than he or she actually puts to work. And so we’re always trying to aid, moving into or taking into life more of that potential. And that’s the humanistic part of it.

Carlson: So we’re sort of like the missing link between Neanderthal man and modern man?

Bugental: You said it. I didn’t.

Carlson: How was this theory developed?

1–5

Bugental: Well, you see, there’s a “the” in the way you asked that question.

Carlson: How was “a” theory developed?

Kjos: How did this come to be?

Bugental: My particular aspect or take on it, the perspective from where I sit, so to speak, was profoundly influenced by the work of Rollo May, whom I mentioned a minute ago. Rollo, in 1958, came out to Los Angeles, where I was at that time, where we’d brought him from New York to talk to us about this whole new thing he was developing. That was the year he brought out the book Existence, and he was just beginning to enunciate an existential view that wasn’t so European, so dark as existentialism usually was in those days. Europe, still recovering from the war, tended to be on the pessimistic side. Rollo was beginning to offer the other side of the story: the optimistic, the growthful side. And when he spoke to us and did a weekend workshop for us, it was for several of us, and certainly for me, an epiphany. It was a real sense of “Aha.” It was...he had words for what we were experiencing in our practices and our teaching but didn’t really have words for before. And I still remember that sense of, “Hey, we’re not all off on an island someplace. There is a mainland, and Rollo is showing us the way to it.”

1–6

Carlson: So not only for you. It sounds like for others he was...

Bugental: Oh yes.
Carlson: …sort of the pioneer of this theory of existential humanist…

Bugental: Indeed so, yeah. And remained so for many years even though others gradually came along. Just to update that story, Rollo died almost two years ago now, but the last thing he did professionally was with a student of mine, Kirk Schneider, and it’s a book called Existence: An Existential, Integrative Approach to Psychology [Note: actual title is The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective]. And Kirk and Rollo put together this book. So he was always offering that integrative, further look.

But to return to your other question, what is this approach, in one sense you can say that its main concern is not with healing or curing an illness but releasing potential that is in each person that is restricted, constricted, imprisoned, whatever word. Our work takes account of the pathological, of course—we have to always be aware of it—but, for instance, a truly psychotic condition, I don’t think this is the therapy for it. It might be after we do some work to deal with the psychosis, but it’s for the person who is in good reality contact but baffled by life, handicapped in life, and that means everybody in some sense. We’re all limited.

Kjos: One of the concerns that we often have is how well does a theory work, or an approach work, with culturally different clients. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Bugental: I can talk a little bit, but not very much, because I think we have a very limited experience with that. I have had some minority clients myself but relatively few in the overall count. Those who’ve worked with me have some. I think gradually more are, as we have more therapists trained in this way, more of that experience will be coming in.

But it’s so early it’s hard to say. That’s one answer, Diane, but I want to give you a second answer. Any human encounters some of the same problems, some of the same demands that life makes, whatever their
color, their racial background. So I think in a certain way, when we find a language to speak in—I don’t mean, like, Spanish, German or something—but a language that we can speak back and forth in, we’ll be dealing with some of the same issues: Who am I? What does it mean to be me? What can I do with myself? How come I get so frustrated in X situation? I don’t think that has a national or racial boundary.

1–10

Carlson: Well, listening to you talk, if I were to use this approach or were to want to use this approach, what type of person would it work best with? I mean, I can see that it would be somebody maybe who was verbal?

Bugental: Yes.

Carlson: Somewhat intelligent?

Bugental: Somewhat intelligent, yes, certainly. And again, that’s a frontier that I think our knowledge of just how far into those regions of not so verbal, not so intelligent, can we be effective. I don’t really know.

Carlson: Is this kind of an approach for healthy people who want to be healthier?

Bugental: It’s certainly that. And also for—now we’re getting into this tricky word health. Are you healthy? I’m not, or I am. I’m not, or I am. You see, it very much depends on our definitions, doesn’t it?

Carlson: Sure.

Bugental: And it depends on a reasonable degree of reality testing or good ego control, or some of those terms.

1–11

Kjos: What about families, couples, groups? Have there been applications…

Bugental: Well, some of my people who’ve studied with me are working in that area now. It’s far too early to bring in any conclusions. Most of the work that we’ve done I think has been with individuals, but inevitably that has brought in family members from time to
time. I see it as very likely to be helpful there, but I don’t have enough firsthand experience to speak beyond that.

**Carlson:** I guess I’m still thinking about the type of person and how you do your work. How would you match your approach to the particular individual person that you’re with? How do you tailor…

**Bugental:** That’s central to the work, of course.

**Carlson:** How so?

1–12

**Bugental:** I spoke a minute ago about the language, not meaning a national language. We develop an individual language between us. Not so much in terms of words but in terms of meanings of the sense of what one means, which is as much nonverbal in some ways as verbal. It’s that unique bond, that unique way of communicating that lends so much strength to the work.

**Carlson:** So one of the ways that you’ll tailor it, then, is by speaking that same language?

**Bugental:** Well, by developing a language together.

**Carlson:** Together.

**Bugental:** Yeah.

**Carlson:** Okay.

**Bugental:** I teach the client some of my language, he teaches me or she teaches me some of her language, so to speak.

**Carlson:** Okay, so it’s a collaboration, then, of the two of you.

**Bugental:** Yeah.

**Carlson:** How else is that done? Is there other ways that you, I guess by its very nature this approach is just personalized then?

1–13

**Bugental:** Hmm, very much so. I’m not sure I understand your question.

**Carlson:** I guess I hear people talk about treating everyone the same way. That if one has a theory, you know—I think Abraham Maslow
said, “If you’ve got a hammer, everything looks like nails.”

Bugental: He did, yes.

Carlson: How do you get some more tools to work specifically in your kit?

Bugental: I think what Maslow was trying to say is that we look at the other person in terms of how we may engage with knowing ourselves in some measure. Not as a conscious thing but implicitly. How can I engage with this person? He wasn’t meaning that you do exactly the same thing. You can use the hammer to pound with, you can use it to pry with, you can use it to pull nails with it and you can use it as a doorstop, and so on. A hammer is an unhandy symbol for a way of being in the world, and my way of being in the world tries to find how it can fit with your way of being in the world. That’s what I called the language a bit ago. But we have to find our unique communication pathway. And this is done implicitly, not by verbal negotiation, you know.

1–14

Kjos: You talked earlier about being influenced or finding a real kind of identity with Rollo May. Can you talk a little more about how you came into choosing this direction for yourself in terms of existential humanistic approach?

1–15

Bugental: Uh-hmm. We had, a group of us, who had been teaching at UCLA, three, left together, founding a private practice, and because we knew that we were relatively naïve in the field—this was 1953, ’54, and there was very little training available, none on the West Coast. We set up our own in house training program and spent up to nine hours a week in self-training, bringing in people, reading books, and studying together, and so on. It was by far my most valuable post-doc experience, and part of that was to bring these speakers from other parts of the country to teach us. Rollo is one. Mona Schwartz, George Kelly, and several others. We had, let me see, five years of finding our way, reading books. Reading Rogers. Finding Rogers helpful but somehow not really encompassing enough for the clientele
we were seeing. Reading some other books that aren’t seen: Leon Salzman’s book was very helpful. Drawing more and more toward the psychoanalytic pathway.

1–16
Indeed, before it all was over we all went into personal analyses, which were very valuable. And I had analytic supervision for a while. So all these streams converging, so to speak, and then Rollo came and he suddenly turns the light on and gave us a way of seeing what we’d been engaged with. As the years passed, I was fortunate enough to keep in contact with him, but others were entering the field: Eugene Gendlin’s valuable word comes out: it’s focusing. Oh, and a number of people around could be mentioned. So it’s an all-American hash, you know: little bits of this and that and the other.

1–17
Carlson: How do you know whether it works or not? You know, the scientists are always wanting research evidence and effectiveness. Is there any research that’s been done that shows how effective this approach is?

Bugental: I don’t think so. I don’t know of any.

Carlson: Is that a concern?

Bugental: Not from a research standpoint. I confess I’m not too impressed by just counting. I think the change that we see in lived lives is much more eloquent.

Carlson: So that’s the kind of accountability that’s important to you?

Bugental: Mm-hmm

Kjos: Individual.

Carlson: Yeah.

Kjos: In terms of... many theories have specific techniques or strategies that are associated with them. Are there any specific ones that we would associate with existential humanistic?

1–18
Bugental: Well, of course that depends on how you define technique
or strategy. Let me say something, though, that may answer that in part. My main focus, if I’m working with someone, is on what is this person’s experience in this moment? I’m not interested in things about this person, but I’m interested in what is alive, living in this person in this moment. And it’s my belief that, if I can sense that and speak in terms of that, it helps the client, then, to become more aware of life that is going on in this moment. What we’re aware of we stand just a little bit apart from. As long as we’re caught within it we can’t see it. There’s an English word that has an interesting double meaning: comprehend. To comprehend means to understand. Comprehend means to contain.

1–19
Kjos: Oh yeah, okay.

Bugental: Okay, what comprehends us, we cannot comprehend.

Kjos: Mm-hmm

Bugental: What we can comprehend, we can understand.

Kjos: Okay.

Bugental: Yeah.

Kjos: That’s interesting.

Bugental: And so it is with the life that each of us is. We comprehend it only incompletely. Having someone really there who helps us comprehend more increases our choicefulness. We offer less from compulsion, from simple history.

Carlson: This is an exciting perspective. In a couple of minutes, we’re going to watch you doing therapy.

Bugental: Mm-hmm.

Carlson: Can you tell us what your goals were when you met with Gina?

1–20
Bugental: My goal is, in one sense, with each person: to help be in tune with what Gina, in that case, was experiencing in the moment, and to feed it back in such a way that she might have more
choicefulness.

**Kjos:** Is there anything special that we should be looking for as we watch this video of you and Gina?

**Carlson:** Maybe you can kind of set it up.

**Bugental:** Mm-hmm, yeah. Let me think just a minute. You might find it interesting to look at the difference between the verbal and the implicit. The explicit and the implicit. Since often what I’m trying to do is reflect that which is implicit but very much present. But which the client, which any of us can’t see. You know, for the three of us sitting here to suddenly stop and take note of how we are in this is a whole different matter than what we’re doing. Each is useful.

1–21

**Carlson:** Okay, so we’re looking for what’s implied with the message.

**Bugental:** With the attention to the implicit, yes.

**Carlson:** Okay.

**Bugental:** Not as opposed to but in concert with the explicit.

**Carlson:** Okay. Well, why don’t we go on and watch you work?

**Bugental:** Why don’t we?

**Kjos:** Thank you. Okay.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY SESSION**

**Bugental–1:** Gina, I find it best when starting something like this to make a transition.

**Gina 1:** Okay.

**Bugental–2:** And what I am going to do, and encourage you to try, is just to breathe inside and get quiet inside.

**Gina–2:** Okay.

**Bugental–3:** So we start from a level playing ground or whatever that means.

**Commentary:** Bugental encourages Gina to look inside herself, and begin attending to her subjective world in the here-and-now of the
therapy session. This is what he refers to as the “search process” or “searching.” As clients are usually expecting a back-and-forth exchange typical of normal conversation, he provides explicit instruction to guide them to do something different. Helping clients really learn to attend to and explore their inner world is an ongoing and complex process; continued instruction and coaching will be required. In fact, this is a core skill of the existential-humanistic approach.

Gina–3: Okay. Neutrality. All right.

Bugental–4: How’d it go? Could you do it?

Gina–4: No. It’s weird.

Bugental–5: It’s hard, isn’t it? Yeah.

Gina–5: It’s, someone had asked me “What do you do during your quiet time?” I’m like, what time? Quiet time? What is that? I don’t have quiet time. I mean my quiet time is usually after the kids go to bed, and then I’m grading papers or cleaning house, or doing something else. It’s still not quiet. There is no noise from other people, but, yeah. The only time that’s real quiet time is when I actually go to sleep. Yeah, I think that’s it. Although I like times where it is quiet. You know, and I do know those times. Like “Ooh, you know, I didn’t do anything. It’s kind of quiet.” I need to have more of those I think. You know, but…

Bugental–6: I think they’re important.

Gina–6: Yeah. They are.

Bugental–7: Try this.

Gina–7: Okay.

Bugental–8: Just go into your center and don’t try to be quiet. Just see what’s going on there. What’s spontaneously going on in you.

Commentary: Bugental gives additional instruction in inner searching. Note that he encourages her to just see what is there, and not put pressure on herself to be quiet or to find anything in particular.

Gina–8: Okay. There is a lot.


Commentary: By focusing on her “wry laugh,” Bugental makes his first
process comment—focusing on this non-verbal cue rather than on the content (i.e. “A lot”). Although therapists generally know the distinction between content and process, it is often poorly understood, or else has different meanings to different therapists. Bugental uses the term “process” to mean almost anything other than the content of the client’s speech—e.g. body movement, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, pattern of speech, nature of client-therapist relationship, etc. Bugental’s approach places heavy emphasis on bringing client’s awareness to their process, and in this way making the implicit explicit.

Gina–9: Yeah. Because it’s like, oh, how could I not, there’s a lot of things going on. Yeah. Inside, probably outside. Yeah, a lot of things on my mind. A lot.

Bugental–10: Does it have a common denominator, a theme, a music?


Gina–11: Yeah. Being able to be productive in the world. To be successful with as few failures as possible. I don’t like failures. I don’t, no, I really don’t like that.

Bugental–12: These sound like instructions. Like, “Survive, be productive, don’t fail.” Is it that kind of...

Gina–12: Yeah, it’s instructions, but it’s... I want to say it’s almost natural, but not really. It’s just something that I’ve been trying to do pretty much all my life, I guess. Even when I was a kid. When I think about it, trying to succeed, even if it was playing Double Dutch, or if it’s my grades, or if it’s doing the best cleaning-up job in the house to please my mom and dad, I always wanted to be on top. And nobody said I had to be on top.


Gina–13: Yeah.

Bugental–14: Inside it said you had to.

Gina–14: Yeah. Inside said I got to be perfect. And it’s something I’m realizing ‘cause I have a girlfriend who... I told her my oldest son had to get glasses. He’s had them about maybe three weeks now. And the
minute I heard he had to wear glasses I felt like I failed. And I know it had nothing to do with me, but it was one of those like I sort of didn’t do something I was supposed to do to help him out in this world. And I told my girlfriend that and she says, “Are you serious?” I said “uh huh.” I was serious that it did feel like I did something wrong, I didn’t do what I was supposed to do.

Bugental–15: Boy, really.

Gina–15: And she was like, “I never knew that about you.” Now we’ve been pretty close now for maybe five years, so it’s still a new friendship. We’re still learning about each other and things, but she was quite surprised to hear me say that.

Bugental–16: What strikes me is how ready you were to point the finger at yourself and find fault with you.

Commentary: Bugental brings attention to the harsh way she judges herself. Notice that he shares this as his impression, including himself in the equation, rather than making a pronouncement as an expert.

Gina–16: Yeah, I do that.

Bugental–17: You do that.

Gina–17: Mm-hmm.

Bugental–18: Other ways, too?

Gina–18: Yeah, I, I do. I mean, I try to find good in me too. Don’t get me wrong. But yeah, I want to find a mistake before somebody else does so that I can sort of take care of them—at least get ready—so that I’m prepared for when somebody notices them.

Bugental–19: That’s funny. That brought a little laugh twice. Did you hear it?

Commentary: Again notice how Bugental brings Gina’s attention to her laugh. By doing so he is attempting to increase her own curiosity and awareness of what is beneath the laughter—e.g. what the laughter is hiding or telling about her attitude toward herself.

Gina–19: A little bit, maybe, yeah.

Bugental–20: What’s that?
Gina–20: ‘Cause I know it’s stupid for me to feel this way.

Bugental–21: Is it? Oh, see, now there you found fault with you already. You called yourself stupid.

Gina–21: Yeah, I did. I know that to be perfect is impossible. That humans aren’t supposed to be perfect. That’s the science and logic behind me, but I can’t help but want to be perfect even though I know that it’s not normal. I mean, you’re supposed to make mistakes. How else do you learn if you don’t make mistakes? But I just don’t want to make any mistakes. And especially I don’t want mistakes for my kids. I don’t want them to make any mistakes. I want to try to cushion every corner I can to make sure they don’t run into problems, and I think my mom kind of wanted to do the same thing for me too, but yet I fought it. Typical, you know. “Don’t do this.” “I’m going to do this anyway.” Just to see, you know, the testing and all of that. But she was kind of protective, I guess. And I’m protective too.


Gina–22: Yeah, well I was able to do some things, but I guess not a lot of things.

Bugental–23: There’s another guess. Do you have to guess about Gina?

Commentary: Bugental frequently points out when clients use qualifiers such as “I guess,” “probably” or “I think.” In doing so he emphasizes ways in which they distance themselves from or cast doubt upon their own experience.

Gina–23: Yeah, now I do. Especially because so many things are…

Bugental–24: You just kind of bit your lip when you thought about that. What’s that about?

Commentary: Again, he brings attention to a non-verbal process.

Gina–24: Mm, I don’t know. Just, something I guess I do. I poke my lip out…

Bugental–25: See, did you hear the guess there? “Something I guess I do.”

Gina–25: Something I guess I do. That’s my… probably that’s a word I use to cover myself.
Bugental–26: That’s a “probably.” That’s like a “guess.” You know we use those things sometimes so we don’t get caught just standing firmly in some way. Does that feel right?

Gina–26: Yeah, it does. It goes back to “I have to be ready for anything that comes up.” So I’m covering myself so if I can say, “I guess,” that sort of gives me the chance of saying “yup” or “maybe no.”

Bugental–27: Maybe not.

Gina–27: Yeah. So that I do. And it has to do with whether I agree with like when I was being raised by my mom, being protective and things like that. In a way I agree with some of the things that she did, and in a way I don’t agree. So that’s why that word “guess” comes in, because it’s giving her some flexibility. Yeah, she did okay, but she wasn’t perfect, although she never tried to be perfect. She said that.

Bugental–28: You’re the one who tries to be perfect.


Bugental–29: Mm-hmm. What happened that time?

Gina–29: Cause I know I shouldn’t, that it’s okay to be who I am, that there’s nothing wrong with who I am, and it’s okay to make mistakes. I tell my two boys that all the time: “It’s all right to make a mistake,” but yet, it’s hard to swallow that myself.

Bugental–30: You don’t give yourself the permission you give them.

Gina–30: Yeah, I don’t. But yet when I do make mistakes...

Bugental–31: What do you think about that? What do you think about Gina?

Gina–31: Probably it causes more...

Bugental–32: No, that’s “probably.” See that’s like a “guess”.

Commentary: He tracks her very closely, and doesn’t let her hedge her bets. Process comments such as these can be experienced by both therapist and client as somewhat confrontational. This may be uncomfortable for therapists who are used to being more “polite” or passive, but Bugental believes that it is the therapist’s job to call attention to patterns that are holding the client back. Attending to and commenting upon the client’s
process is like any skill, and takes time and practice to learn to do well. Any use of confrontation must be accompanied by support, with the context of the therapy and the nature of the therapeutic alliance taken into account. In this case it appears that Gina responds favorably to his active engagement.

Gina–32: Yeah, ‘cause I’m not sure.

Bugental–33: Let’s think, you’re better; you give your boys more freedom to make mistakes than you give Gina. Sort of chew that one for a minute and see what comes.

Commentary: He invites her to pause and check inward, to engage in more inner searching.

Gina–33: I’m responsible for them; that’s why I can’t make mistakes. They’re still learning.

Bugental–34: No laugh this time.

Commentary: He highlights the absence of her customary laugh, underscoring that she is really taking the therapeutic exploration seriously.

Gina–34: No, no laugh this time, ‘cause I take the raising of them very seriously.

Bugental–35: Very serious.

Gina–35: Yeah, ‘cause I brought them into this world. And I always said growing up that if I’m going to bring children into the world; I’m the one that’s supposed to be responsible. Nobody else, me. And so I do take it very seriously. Sometimes I don’t even enjoy being a mom, ‘cause I take it so seriously, I feel.

Bugental–36: Ah, it spoils some of the good times.

Gina–36: Yeah. Some of the fun that we should have we don’t have probably.

Bugental–37: For example…

Commentary: Bugental keeps a balanced focus on both process and content. She has slowed down and her affect seems more congruent with her words; he responds by shifting the focus onto content, leading her
more productively into an exploration of her concerns.

Gina–37: Oh, like I’ll go home from work, and I’ve been away from them all day, and I miss them, but instead of me just being kind of jovial like, “Hey guys, how are you doing, da da, da da,” I sort of jump into the, “Okay, did you put your book bag away, did you put your coat away? Did you start your homework? Did you do…?” And, and that is part of me. Organized, have everything in place. Because if it is then they have less problems in their life.

Bugental–38: True.

Gina–38: They don’t wake up in the morning wondering, “Where’s my book bag?” or “Where’s my coat?” or “Where’s this?” So that keeps them sort of organized, but it does create a situation where it’s like, “Dang, I wish we’d just sort of not worry about it for a while.” You know, so I’ve tried sometimes to not do that. I call it nagging, ‘cause it falls into that category, you know, but…

Bugental–39: But how’s it going?

Gina–39: Hmm… There are days when it’s good and days when it’s bad. I’m beginning to recognize it though now. When I feel tension I realize “Okay, wait, whoa, stop for a minute. Let’s just chill for a while,” and then I think, “Okay, you didn’t come in and do this, this and this. You came in and did this and this.” And then I have to think about what happened with them. And then sometimes, the general statement is, “Well, how did school go?” “Oh fine.” But that’s the typical response that they are going to give me. But later on in the evening, I’ll hear about something that happened at recess, or something else. But see if I don’t hear that at first, then I jump into my thing that I’ve got my agenda, and they might not be quite there because they are still dealing with what happened at school. I’m catching myself more, now.

Bugental–40: Well, one thing I can see is you don’t stop on Gina. You’re teaching her new things and keeping on top of her.

Gina–40: Yeah.

Bugental–41: Kind of a look when you hear that.
Commentary: Another process comment, this time focusing on her facial expression.

Gina–41: I’m changing. I’m growing. I’m definitely not stagnant.

Bugental–42: You’re not stagnant.

Gina–42: No, I was a while ago.


Gina–43: Yeah. For about a couple of years I was pretty much stuck in the same spot. But I’m not going to be there for much longer. I’m… Well, actually, I’m out of it. Well, not so much that I’m out of it; I’m working my way out of it, cause it’s going to be ongoing.

Bugental–44: Say more. It sounds like something important is going on in you.

Gina–44: Yeah. I’m getting a divorce, so that is pretty important.

Bugental–45: Yeah, it is.

Gina–45: Yeah. I’ll be taking care of the boys. I’ll be the custodian for the boys, so there’s a lot on my mind and, as I said, there’s a lot going on. Quiet time is like… no quiet time. Although I’m trying to find times where it’s quiet. It’s working out pretty good, you know. But, as it gets closer to that time where it’s about to end; it’s shaky. A lot going on in my mind, in…

Bugental–46: You’re shaky?

Gina–46: Yeah, I’m shaky, meaning that I have some doubts now that maybe I didn’t have before. I have some concerns now that I didn’t have before. As you get closer to that point where everything is like, “over,” you wonder, “Did I do the right thing? Am I doing the right thing?” All along I was thinking that, but as it gets to the end, there goes that, “What if I’m making a mistake?” Or, “What if I’m not doing the right thing?” That goes back to being perfect again.

Bugental–47: Yes, it sure does.

Gina–47: And it’s something I’ve been thinking about for a couple of weeks now. Especially after my son getting the glasses, I thought about how I felt, but it was like, “Hmm…”
Bugental–48: That showed you how judgmental you are.

Gina–48: Yeah.

Bugental–49: About yourself, yeah.

Commentary: Again we see how his comments begin to coalesce around the high standards Gina holds herself to, and the accompanying self-criticism and judgment. Bugental often refers to a client’s “self-and-world-construct,” which is how they see themselves, and how they engage with others and the world-at-large. As this is just the first session, he will be limited to simply beginning to point out and help increase her awareness of these patterns. In long-term psychotherapy the goal will be to help her use her heightened awareness so she has more choices in how she relates to herself and the world around her.

Gina–49: Yeah, I am. Although, I like myself. I do. I still don’t know why I had to be so perfect. I try to pinpoint when did it start, and I don’t know when. It just sort of, you know, started happening.

Bugental–50: That’s a hard question to answer.

Gina–50: Yeah.

Bugental–51: Where is it that you are most apt to be judgmental? Under what conditions?

Gina–51: Hmm. Probably in terms of raising my boys to make sure I’m doing the very best that I can. As far as making the right decisions and giving them the right opportunities or consequences, and things like that. I wonder. Especially being a female raising two boys. There I tend to be a little more judgmental. Probably with relationships with men I am going to be very judgmental. That’s going to be interesting.

Bugental–52: Your mouth...

Gina–52: Did I poke my lip out when I did that?

Bugental–53: When you said “relations,” what goes on when you do that?

Gina–53: Well, I don’t want to make the same mistakes I made the first time around. That’s the first thing with me, yeah, definitely.

Commentary: This is a good example of how a process comment (in
this case regarding her facial expression) helps bring to her awareness a concern that was not explicitly expressed.

**Bugental–54:** I heard it.

**Gina–54:** Goes back to being perfect again. Not perfect, but just making sure that I go about it the right way this time and that I don’t go into it thinking certain things are going to happen and they’re not. I don’t want to go into another relationship thinking, “I am going to change that person,” because that’s what I thought at first. And you can’t really do that. I’m stuck on how much I want them to take care of me. See, I grew up with my dad taking care of us. My mom stayed home for most of the time, but then she eventually started to work. But dad was the major breadwinner and mom was the one that we came home and she was there cooking meals and things like that. And even when she started working, she became a teacher, so she had the same hours that we did. But I grew up with dad was the one; the male was the one, who was supposed to take care of everything. And in my marriage that has not been the case at all. So, it’s totally different.

**Bugental–55:** Big grin.

**Gina–55:** Well, I can accept that now. I fought it for a while, and I didn’t like it for a long time.

**Bugental–56:** Past tense?

**Gina–56:** Yeah. ‘Cause in a way for me not to like it, is going against me of taking charge and being responsible and doing things and not waiting for somebody else to do it. So, I don’t know if I want someone to quote-unquote “take care of me” in a relationship. I’m at a point now where I don’t need anybody to take care of me. I could do this myself.

**Bugental–57:** You’re kind of mocking yourself right now, quote-unquote take care of me. How come?

**Gina–57:** Anger, still—probably from the relationship.

**Bugental–58:** Ah, that’s a probably.

**Commentary:** Again he notes the word “probably,” which encourages how this leads her to take a stronger stance.
Gina—58: No, that’s definite. No, I am still angry that a lot of responsibilities fell on me when it shouldn’t have. When it should have been more of a partnership. So, yeah. There’s no problem. Definite about that. So…

Bugental—59: Yeah, you sound very different now.

Gina—59: Yeah, a little. Different things play back in my mind. Different times when I had to take charge and when I didn’t. It’s few, but at the same time where I say that, I have to look at how I am as a person. And, again, it takes two people to make a relationship, and as much as you come together, it takes two to make it fall apart. I even think that part of the reason that we are not going to be together anymore is because of me and the way that I am, the fact that I do take charge and do things and sort of like to fix stuff. I like to solve problems for other people. Why? I don’t know. It’s just sort of my nature. It’s like there will be a problem and I just automatically start fixing it. It’s not my problem, it belongs to somebody else, but, in this relationship, in the marriage, I thought, “Oh, well I’m supposed to do this, and do this and do this.” And then it became, “Well you’re going to do it so why do I have to do it?” And then I dug myself a hole because I started doing that. Then my husband backed off and said, “Well, I don’t have to do that then—you’ve got to do it.” And then that goes back until you feel taken for granted, don’t feel appreciated, but yet you’re the one that did it. You’re the one that started jumping up and doing this, this, and this and this.

Bugental—60: Was that a hard thing to learn?

Gina—60: Yeah. To admit that I might have…

Bugental—61: ‘Cause the way you mocked again, every once in a while you just mocked yourself about something that isn’t really very funny.


Bugental—62: My hunch is that there must be a lot of hurt under there someplace. The mocking keeps the hurt down. Does that seem right?

Gina—62: Yeah. Probably, because if you find humor in it, it tends to lessen it a bit. If you can find the joke behind it or the… I’m glad that’s there [referring to box of tissue].
**Commentary:** Bugental’s hunch that there “must be a lot of hurt under there” evokes strong emotions. This comment on its own would not have such an effect, but he has effectively laid the groundwork with numerous process comments about her smile, laughter, and self-mocking. He has also formed an alliance with her with his genuine curiosity and warmth.

**Bugental–63:** It’s all right.

**Gina–63:** Yeah. It’s much easier to laugh about things than to cry about them. But...

**Bugental–64:** But sometimes if we laugh about instead of cry, we don’t deal with the real issue.

**Commentary:** We see here that Gina’s subtle mocking of herself truncates her own emotional awareness, and how Bugental’s pointing this out and tracking her very closely allows her to go quite deep in a single session.

**Gina–64:** Yeah. And I do that sometimes.

**Bugental–65:** Yeah. So, you’re doing your work.

**Gina–65:** Yeah. I haven’t done this in a while. Been too busy doing things. Probably I haven’t, because I make sure that I don’t, for the boys. Because I know it’s a change for them, and if I was strong, then they’ll be able to get through it with as little pain as possible. ‘Cause that’s probably the only regret I have with it. If it was just me and him—snap, I really wouldn’t think about it too much. But with kids it’s...

**Bugental–66:** It’s another thing.

**Gina–66:** Yeah, it is. But I feel strong enough about what I’m doing that I am going to still do it. Because I tried the other way too where, “Oh, for the kids, don’t get divorced.” And that’s not good either.

**Bugental–67:** That didn’t work.

**Gina–67:** No, that’s not good either, because you still stop being a person. You still stop being who you are, and then you’re no good for the kids. You’re no good for yourself, first of all, and then you’re no good for them. So, you know, as it’s getting closer to the point where the divorce will be final, yeah, a lot of things are going on in my head.
And I don’t think I want quiet time ‘cause this will happen.

**Bugental–68:** But sometimes that cleans the slate, you know. You’d be more real with yourself.

**Gina–68:** Yeah.

**Bugental–69:** ‘Cause it’s kind of fooling yourself if you laugh instead of letting you know your pain.

**Gina–69:** Yeah, it is. Because when you do, you have to accept everything: your faults, your good things. You may have to work with things that you would...you try to avoid certain things and you realize, “Man, there is no way I can avoid it.”

**Bugental–70:** Yeah, they don’t go away.

**Gina–70:** No, they don’t. You’re going to have to deal with it to the best of your ability, so... I have real good support; I have real good support with my friends and with my family. So, they’ve helped me go through it.

**Bugental–71:** Good enough.

**Gina–71:** Yeah, it helps. But I do beat myself up. I know I do.

**Bugental–72:** Yeah, I was just going to say, they don’t beat you up, you do.

**Gina–72:** No, they don’t. When I think about it, I mean, they tease me about stuff, but basically, no. They pretty much have sat back and let me try to figure everything out on my own. But they’ve always reassured me that they’re there. I’m the one that’s pretty much done that. I’m the one that beats myself up. I’m more critical of myself probably than they are.

**Bugental–73:** Now you say that, and it sounds right, but how do you feel about that fact? Does it matter?

**Gina–73:** That I’m critical of myself?

**Bugental–74:** Mm-hmm. More than other people.

**Gina–74:** I shouldn’t be more so than other people.

**Bugental–75:** Does it matter? You didn’t answer that question.
**Commentary:** By asking Gina “Does it matter?” Bugental is implicitly encouraging her to take herself seriously—and to take the therapy seriously.

**Gina–75:** Well, probably, no it shouldn’t matter.

**Bugental–76:** Why all the…[Bugental mirrors her facial expressions]? 

**Gina–76:** I don’t know because I’m not sure.

**Bugental–77:** Yeah, I think that’s an important question. Yeah, it doesn’t matter.

**Gina–77:** I think we should self-analyze, you know, figure things out.

**Bugental–78:** You bet.

**Gina–78:** We should admit our mistakes. That we should do because if you don’t, they are going to keep coming back, and you’re never going to grow.

**Bugental–79:** You betcha.

**Gina–79:** So that in one way I do believe that you should be critical of yourself. But it shouldn’t be destructive. It shouldn’t get you in a depression and you shouldn’t lose your self-esteem over it. You shouldn’t stop functioning because of it.

**Bugental–80:** Now I’m going to play mean and point out you suddenly switched to the second person. You’re saying, “you shouldn’t.”

**Gina–80:** Okay, meaning that…

**Bugental–81:** What about Gina, first person.

**Commentary:** When clients speak in the second person, (using “you” instead of “I”) it is usually a way of distancing themselves from their thoughts or feelings. By encouraging her to speak in the first person, he is asking her to get behind her words.

**Gina–81:** First person. I…

**Bugental–82:** Ah, the faces come back. Did you see it?

**Gina–82:** Yeah. I thought, “Uh oh, making faces again.” I could say with me, yeah, that I shouldn’t be so critical of myself.
Commentary: One of the goals of making process comments, such as noting Gina’s facial expressions, is to help her begin to increase her own awareness of the nuances of her internal experience. Her comment here shows that she is already doing this—that Bugental’s interventions are already having an impact.

Bugental–83: What can you do about it?

Commentary: From increased awareness comes the possibility of change, and Bugental presses her to take the next step.

Gina–83: I should totally accept who I am.

Bugental–84: Can you?

Gina–84: Most of the time, yeah, I think I can.

Bugental–85: Yeah, this brings a grin.

Gina–85: But I know I have my ways that sometimes aren’t the nicest, or sometimes I can be stubborn and don’t want to give in.

Bugental–86: But you are making “beating yourself up” and “finding fault” or “finding things that you wish were different” the same thing. I don’t know whether they are or not. Do you think they are?

Gina–86: That if my faults are…

Bugental–87: If you do something…if you are stubborn: let’s take that.

Gina–87: That’s not a bad trait. I don’t think that’s a bad trait.

Bugental–88: Okay.

Gina–88: I think it’s a good trait.

Bugental–89: Now you’re not beating yourself up.

Gina–89: Right. Yeah. I see what you—you switched it. Yeah. It’s a good trait to have. I like being stubborn. I do. But I’m also flexible. I have to be because of my kids. I have to be flexible.

Bugental–90: They teach you.

Gina–90: Yeah they do. And then, not even just the kids, though, but I even like to be flexible. Me. I do. Because then it then allows me some
leeway, here or there. So maybe it goes back so I don’t make a mistake or so I can end up figuring things out and still being in control of things. So, no, I shouldn’t beat myself up about it. You’re right, I really shouldn’t. It’s actually sort of a good quality.

**Bugental–91:** Yeah. You look reflective now. Just stay with that and find out where it takes you.

**Commentary:** Bugental again encourages her to look inward, to continue the search process.

**Gina–91:** Okay. Being stubborn, eventually people will see it my way. They will go the way that I want to go, so that I end up still in charge. But the first thing I am thinking now is, “What if I make a mistake?” See, that thought came in.

**Bugental–92:** I know.

**Gina–92:** That thought came in. Just as I got done saying I’m in charge, but “What if I mess up?” That is always there.

**Bugental–93:** Always there.

**Gina–93:** Yeah. That fear of making a mistake. I don’t know, I’ve made mistakes. A lot. And I’ve come out okay from them. I mean, there’s some I wish I didn’t do, but I’m still here and still doing things. So why does it matter? I don’t know why it matters so much.

**Bugental–94:** You’re doing your work. Just stay in there. What if you make a mistake?

**Gina–94:** Well, if I make a mistake it could mean I end up paying for it, meaning that more time has to be put into something, and right now it’s like I’m already going five different directions, but I think I kind of like that. My personality. I think I like a lot of things going on at once. If I make a mistake—it costs as far as time goes—it costs maybe money, and that’s a concern to me to make sure I have enough money to take care of everything. If I make a mistake it means I’m human.

**Bugental–95:** Oh, you grit your teeth when you say that [laughs].

**Commentary:** At any point in time the therapist has many choices regarding process commentary: first, whether a comment of any kind is
desirable, and second, which of many possibilities of bodily, voice, tone, words and other variables to draw attention to. Of course, the goal is not simply to point out any activity that the client may be unaware of, but rather to shift their attention to behaviors or nuances that seem to have some significance in terms of their symptoms, coping patterns, or self-and-world-construct. Note how many small details Bugental picks up on.

**Gina—95:** I like being human, I do. But I want to be on the upper end of that.

**Bugental—96:** I see, okay.

**Gina—96:** I want to be on the upper end of that. Making a mistake means that maybe somebody else was right and you weren’t and being able to say, “Okay, you were right” is kind of hard.

**Bugental—97:** Now that has a little tag on it, doesn’t it. I could see you sort of…

**Gina—97:** Yeah.

**Bugental—98:** See, just explore that feeling a little bit.

**Commentary:** He is continuing to teach her how to look inward and pay attention to what is she is experiencing in the present moment. There is a subtle but important difference between when the client discovers what is inside of them versus when they report things they already know.

**Gina—98:** Well, I always have to be right, or letting someone else be right gives up some of my control of a situation. It means that maybe I’m not the one that’s responsible. Maybe it means I get some freedom, which I actually do want sometimes.

**Bugental—99:** Sometimes.

**Gina—99:** I don’t know, it’s kind of nice when I do it. When I admit, “Okay, you were right and I was wrong.” But it staggers out; it doesn’t come out real smooth. It doesn’t come out with a smile. It’s like “Okay, all right, all right.” But it is getting better. But it’s kind of tough.

**Bugental—100:** Yeah.

**Gina—100:** It’s kind of tough, but I make a mistake, hmm, life goes on. It doesn’t stop.
Bugental–101: Nope.

Gina–101: It might mean things get prolonged a bit, or I have to think a little bit more about something, but I’m not going to give up. That’s something I don’t do.

Bugental–102: You don’t do that.

Gina–102: No. I complain maybe in the process of facing that mistake, but I’ve never given up on something.

Bugental–103: When you say that, you’re quite sure.

Gina–103: Yeah. I figure things where I know it was tough but I kept going, then I could put my head up when it was done. It feels good, yeah.

Bugental–104: So there’s that side of Gina too.


Bugental–105: That’s it.

Gina–105: Yeah. I do. I see it in my oldest, too. I’m very competitive. That drives my girlfriend crazy. Well, it doesn’t drive her crazy, but we’re so different. She is not competitive at all, and I am. But I get that because of my family. With four brothers and sisters and always competing to get your point across and say what you want to say. We’re all headstrong. It comes a lot from that. When I am competitive, I push myself to work the very hardest that I can and then I do exactly what I want to do. I see the end result, and I like it.

Bugental–106: When you talk about being competitive, there’s a, a little spark comes into you.

Commentary: Notice how Bugental picks up on what she is sure about, and what enlivens her. Therapists may fall into the trap of only commenting on ways clients keep their feelings at bay, limit themselves, or detach from the therapy or therapist; it is equally important to notice ways that they expand, become alive, or become more engaged.

Gina–106: Yeah. ‘Cause I’m good when I’m competitive. I mean there
are things I’m really good at, and I know it’s all because I worked at it. And I like that. I just started playing tennis again. I played for years and then I had kids. And then, naturally, you stop because you gotta stay with them, you don’t have money, and then I kind of lost interest in it I think. And I started back Thanksgiving. And I’m good. I’m good now. I like it. I feel comfortable with it. I’m better now than I was 12 years ago, but I’m working at it. And I know exactly what I want to do with it. And it’s got a certain spot in my life.

**Bugental–107:** Now, there’s that sureness.

**Gina–107:** I know exactly what I want from tennis in my life. Whereas, before I didn’t. I think that’s why I kind of backed out of it because of that. But now, I know exactly what I want.

**Bugental–108:** Mm-hmm. I’m reflecting that you called yourself stubborn. But, in another way, it’s having an idea of what you want to do and going for it and staying with it. It isn’t just stubborn, it’s...

**Gina–108:** No, it’s determination.

**Bugental–109:** Determination, yeah.

**Gina–109:** I know what I want to do. It’s like I knew I wanted to do certain things in my life.

**Bugental–110:** Like what?

**Gina–110:** I wanted to get married. That’s a big joke, now I’m getting divorced, but that’s okay. That’s all right. I did it; that was okay. I wanted to have kids. I wanted to have a job that I liked going to at least three days out of five. I wanted to make enough money to be comfortable. I wanted to be healthy enough to be able to do anything. Like if you say, let’s go climb a mountain tomorrow, I want to be healthy enough to make it a third of the way up. Not all the way, because I know you don’t do that, but healthy enough to not have any limitations. With anything that you want to do. And I’ve pretty much done those things.

**Bugental–111:** Sounds like you checked them off.

**Gina–111:** Yeah.

**Bugental–112:** What’s ahead? What do you want to do now?
Commentary: Existential-Humanistic Therapy tends to focus more on the present and future; the past is explored primarily with the aim of assisting the client to live more fully and meaningfully.

Gina–112: Oh man. Now you know...

Bugental–113: Oh man, huh?

Gina–113: I haven’t made that list—yet. I haven’t, um...

Bugental–114: See what’s percolating in there.

Commentary: Another nudge to get her to look inward. Note the different language he uses in an effort to help Gina tune into her inner experience. He will keep trying until he finds phrases or metaphors that seem to click with the client, often borrowing their words to find a common language. He may use these words as a form of shorthand in future sessions.

Gina–114: Yeah. What do I want to do now? Okay, “mom” is the first thing that comes into my head. I want to have, well; I want to be a better mom, okay. That’s the goal. Especially since...

Bugental–115: We’ve come back to that theme a couple times.

Gina–115: Okay, I want to be a better mom. I want to continue being close to my family, spending time with them, and doing things with them.

Bugental–116: Who’s your family?

Gina–116: My mom, my dad, my sister and two brothers, a niece. Yeah. That’s my immediate family.


Gina–117: Yeah. I want to continue to give in my friendship with my girlfriend, actually with a couple of my girlfriends. I want to do more for them, because they’ve done a lot for me. And I want to sort of be there for them. So that means I got to get other things of my life straight so that when they need me I can go right there and be okay for them. There is a possibility that I might go on to get my Ph.D., but I don’t know. I don’t know about that one. But that’s sort of there. My mom wants me to do it probably more than I want to do it. And I
don’t know, I might.

**Bugental–118:** What happened? Your little spark just…

**Gina–118:** I know, I was thinking well, my job is okay. I’m a pretty good teacher. I could probably get better at that, year by year. I thought about a relationship. Like getting involved with a man again is like, well, “I don’t want to make the same mistake I did before.” Probably a goal with that would be to communicate better. Definitely communicate better in a relationship. To talk openly about how I feel. Not to hold back, not worry about saying something, they’re not going to like or say something they disagree with.

**Bugental–119:** Can you do that?

**Gina–119:** Yes. I can.

**Bugental–120:** You paused a minute to really consider. Can you say anything about what happened in that minute when you were considering? What did you, what went through…

**Gina–120:** Well, I thought, I’ve accomplished other things in my life. I should be able to do this. This is not something that’s impossible, so that the hesitation was, “I should be able to do this. I know I’ve done it in the past.” It still involves another person and how they’re going to respond. So that’s why it’s like, “Well, I could do it, but I don’t know if the other person can.” And that goes into you can only contribute so much to a relationship. You can only give yourself. You can’t really expect the other person; you can’t change the other person. You’ve got to go into it accepting the person as they are, and hopefully, you will be able to work that out. But communication is definitely something that I have to do. I have to be selfish. That’s a goal. That’s the goal. Now that’s a big one.

**Bugental–121:** Yeah, there it is.

**Gina–121:** That’s probably more so than all of them.

**Bugental–122:** Say more about what that means.

**Gina–122:** I need to put myself first. I need to put myself first even before my kids. Because there were times when I didn’t. And I lost myself a little bit when I did that. Being selfish does not mean I can’t
be a good mother.

**Bugental–123:** No.

**Gina–123:** Or a good friend, or a good family member. I thought it was though. Which is why I wasn’t selfish. Which is why I gave and gave and allowed things to happen. Then I woke up and said, “I can’t do this.”

**Bugental–124:** What would be an example, where that happened?

**Gina–124:** Oh, well, okay, if say, like my girlfriend and I go out, and I always pay. Sometimes I can say, “No, I don’t want to pay.” I couldn’t do that before. I could do it now. I could do it now.

**Bugental–125:** What’s different?

**Gina–125:** Well, first thing, I got to watch my money now because I have to take care of the two boys without my husband. So that is the driving force. But also, I can do it because I know that I have a right to say that. That it’s okay for me.

**Bugental–126:** Didn’t you know that before?

**Gina–126:** Way back here. [Points to back of head] It wasn’t up front. No.

**Bugental–127:** What was up front?

**Gina–127:** Doing whatever it takes to please people.

**Bugental–128:** “Do whatever it takes to please people.” Wow.

**Gina–128:** And not disappoint them.

**Bugental–129:** Mm.

**Gina–129:** Yeah. That’s a big thing.

**Bugental–130:** That is a big one.

**Gina–130:** Real big. And that’s the one I’ve got to, that’s the first, that’s the goal to think about myself.

**Bugental–131:** So that’s what you call selfish, if you don’t do whatever it takes to please people, that’s selfish?

**Gina–131:** If I don’t please, yeah. If people don’t like me. Yeah. It has
to do with I want people to like me. I want you to like me and you
don’t even know me. I don’t want you to not like me. I don’t even
know who you are.

**Bugental–132:** I know.

**Gina–132:** But that’s there, that’s there. Like being perfect.

**Bugental–133:** Can you give up that? You’ve been doing that a while.

**Gina–133:** It’s going to be hard. I’ve been doing it for 37 years—well,
maybe not quite that long, but long time. I’ll slip up. I slipped up
lately, you know, a couple of times doing it, but…

**Bugental–134:** Now there’s where the question… when you slipped
up, how are you going to be with yourself?

**Gina–134:** Well, I’m not going to beat myself up about it, ‘cause I am
going to say, “Ah, you know, that’s how you are.” Okay. Next time, let’s
do this instead, so that I’m not going to beat myself.

**Bugental–135:** Can you really do that? Can you…

**Gina–135:** I want to do it.

**Bugental–136:** I know you do.

**Gina–136:** And because I’m determined to do it, yeah. Can I do it
immediately? No. But I think in a few years I will be able to. Yeah.

**Bugental–137:** You’ve got to be patient with yourself in between.

**Gina–137:** Yeah.

**Bugental–138:** That’s been hard.

**Gina–138:** Yeah. I have to be patient. I’m patient probably with a lot of
things but me…

**Bugental–139:** You’re kind of recognizing that right now. What came
with that?

**Gina–139:** I thought about being patient with the kids, with the boys.
But I am patient with them. But then myself, I’m not patient with my
job. You know, I’ve got to get things done, or don’t put it off. Do it
now. With relationships, it’s got to be just right now or forget it, and
you’ve got to be a little flexible. I’m thinking it’s like, you don’t agree.
After watching like a television program, walk away and think about it. You don’t have to agree at that moment. You don’t have to convince that person at that moment. You may never agree, and that’s okay. I have to work on that. And that’s just being patient or understanding that everybody is entitled to their own thought and...

**Bugental–140:** Including you.

**Gina–140:** Yeah, including me, too.

**Bugental–141:** Sounds like a good program.

**Gina–141:** Yeah, hey, I didn’t think about that. That’s pretty good. To really put me first. Yeah. I like doing that. I really do. When I do put myself first, boy, I feel really good. I can tackle anything. I mean I can tackle kids turning in assignments late at school, coming up with five million excuses. I can take my kids bickering with each other. When I feel good about me, it’s like, “Okay, no big problem.” No, I’ve got patience, flexible, and I think about instances where I did that. Where I put myself first, and I remember how I felt with that, and the, the problems that happened right after that—it’s a piece of cake. Why can’t I remember that all the time? I don’t know.

**Bugental–142:** Let’s slow down. “Why can’t I remember that all the time?” That’s not just your question. Stay with that question inside you.

**Commentary:** As Gina tends to speak quickly and skim over her feelings, he again encourages her to slow down and explore her inner space.

**Gina–142:** Well, I’ve got some patterns that I’ve developed over a long period of time. And it’s going to take some time to totally break out of them. I wonder if I’ll even ever really be able to totally break free. I still think there will be a little bit there, but it won’t be predominant. It won’t be as predominant.

**Bugental–143:** Most of these things aren’t all or none.

**Gina–143:** Yeah. I’m learning that. There’s a big area in the middle. Very big area in the middle that most things fall into.

**Bugental–144:** Well, as a teacher, you know about learning curves. They go like this. They don’t go zoom.
Gina–144: I’m finding that if I use my teaching strategies with my personal life, I’m a lot happier. It works out pretty good. It’s like, because I do think that. I take into consideration, “They’re kids, they make mistakes, things happen.” I take that into consideration for everybody but me.

Bugental–145: There you go. Now it’s time for you.
Gina–145: Yeah.

Bugental–146: Our time’s just about up. Anything you want to say?
Gina–146: Gosh, it goes fast.

Bugental–147: Anything you’d like to say to me?
Gina–147: Thank you.

Bugental–148: You’re welcome, Ma’am.
Gina–148: Thank you because I needed to self-reflect, and I don’t do it.

Bugental–149: Make time for Gina.
Gina–149: Yeah, to sort of just chill. Just sit back and think, add up, not really take a checklist, but…

Bugental–150: No, more just like you started out tonight. Just take time to listen.

Bugental–151: There go those faces.
Gina–151: Ah, don’t—I know, I know.

Bugental–152: That’s all right. Maybe sometimes you ought to do it looking in the mirror.
Gina–152: I should, because everybody sees them, and I don’t even know I’m doing it. Yeah. But no, I will reflect. That will be good. Thank you.

Bugental–153: You’re welcome, and very good fortune to you.
Gina–153: Thank you very much.
Video Credits

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