

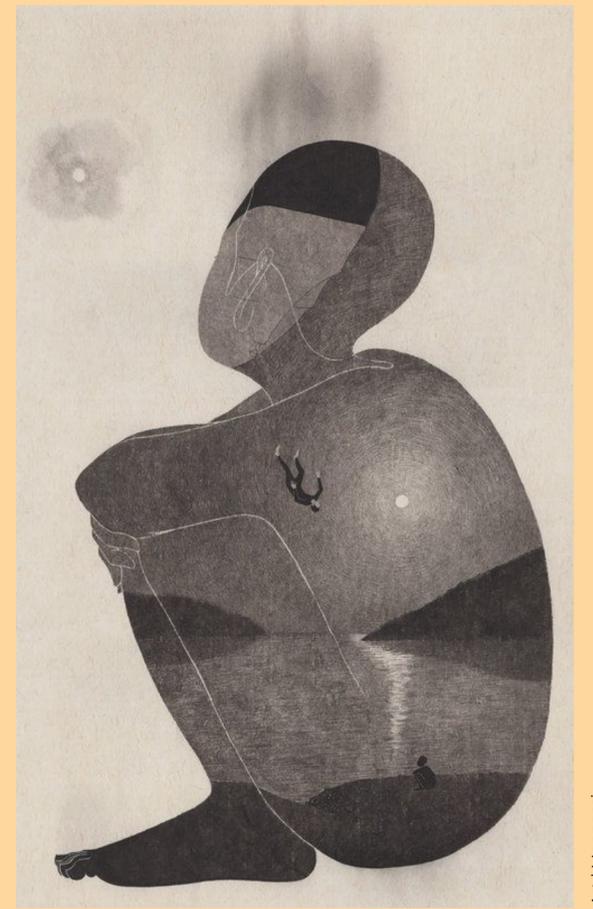
# The existential dimension of the experience of seclusion.

A qualitative study among former psychiatric inpatients.

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## BACKGROUND

Seclusion is a coercive measure - temporary confinement in an almost empty, non-stimulating room in a closed psychiatric admission ward to prevent (further) danger due to a mental disorder. Although there is an ongoing ethical discussion about seclusion, as well as research about patients' behaviors during separation (e.g. hitting walls or doors, sleeping, or praying), research into the subjective and existential dimension of the experience of seclusion in psychiatry is rare.

## RESULTS

The respondents clearly affirmed the ultimate existential concerns about death, lack of freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. With respect to the latter, the respondents reported a rich variety of spiritual experiences (both negative, such as knowing to be in hell, as positive, hearing the comforting voice of God or noticing or imagining a peaceful scenery of nature in the room).

## DISCUSSION

Although some experiences and behaviors may conflate with symptoms of psychosis, the participants generally expressed a relief about the ability to talk about their experiences. Shyness and shame had dominated so far. Sharing and discussing the existential experiences fits into the paradigm of psychiatric recovery and personalized care. Their intensity was obvious and might have warranted additional support by a chaplain or spiritual counselor in mental health care settings.

## AIM

The current study investigates to what extent experiences during an involuntary stay in a seclusion room can be interpreted as ultimate, existential concerns (cf. Yalom) or even as boundary situations (cf. Jaspers).

## METHODS

The urge of attention to R/S in clinical care is illustrated by results of a qualitative study among former clients (N=10) who had been involuntarily admitted to a mental health clinic and also had been secluded in a seclusion room.

## RESULTS | ULTIMATE CONCERNS (YALOM)

### DEATH (39X):

**The fear of dying** | The fear of being murdered

**The fear of already being dead** | Brought back by a nurse

**Suicide** | *'...then things might have gone wrong for me.'*

### LACK OF FREEDOM (81X):

**Powerlessness** | *'As if you are an object'*

**Empowerment** | *'How do I get out of here?'*

**Designing one's own life** | *'As if I was laying in the grass'*

### ISOLATION (157X):

**Intrapersonal** | *'Quite liberating'*

**Interpersonal** | *'Talk - no, write - yes'*

**Existential** | *'You feel no longer human'*

### LACK OF MEANING (43X):

**Lack of meaning** | *'Just lock me up, that's what I'm worth'*

**Prominence of meaning** | Spirituality

## BOUNDARY SITUATIONS (JASPERS)

**Death, Struggle, Guilt, Chance**

The seclusion experiences have been referred to as both extremes on the spectrum from 'lifesaving' to 'traumatic'. Both extremes can be boundary situations. 3 respondents show that the separation was experienced an ultimate turning point, whereby the separation is referred to as a 'wake up call'.

Six respondents indicated that the separation was a turning point, but in the form of a low that has done more harm than good.

## Spiritual experiences and behaviours

(Eight from ten respondents)

Pray and confess  
Visit of an imaginary priest  
The feeling of being 'helped'  
Visit of a guardian angel  
An agreement with God  
Presence of God  
Picking a rose from rock bottom  
Experience of unity  
Having the experience of being dead and being brought back  
Heavenly light  
Being in hell  
Connection with a tree or nature

Key words: Seclusion; Existential meaning; Ultimate concerns; Boundary situations; Spiritual experiences.

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