

GESTALT THERAPY

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"I am not in this world to live up to other people's expectations, nor do I feel that the world must live up to mine."

--Fritz Perls

Gestalt

- Gestalt is a German word which refers to the total shape of something.
- A *gestalt*, or whole, both includes & transcends the sum of its parts.
- It cannot be understood simply as a sum of smaller, independent events.

Theory of Personality

- A person exists by differentiating self from other & by connecting self & other
- These are the two functions of a **boundary**
- The boundary between self & environment must be permeable to allow for exchanges, yet firm enough to enable autonomous action
- When the boundary becomes unclear, lost, or impermeable, mental & emotional disturbance results

Gestalt Therapy

- **Main originator & developer of Gestalt Therapy**

Fritz Perls(1893-1970) / wife Laura Perls(1905-1990)

- It is an existential/phenomenological approach
- Therapists try to **increase clients' awareness**
- It is grounded in the client's **"here and now"**

Key concepts of Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt Therapy is another type of counseling that is based upon the existential framework. Key elements include:

- **Phenomenological Basis**

You are seeking to focus on the client's perception of reality

- **Experiential**

The client is being asked to come to understand about what and how they are thinking, feeling, and doing as they interact with the therapist and the other people in the world

Key concepts of Gestalt Therapy

- **Existential**

The person is to take responsibility for their destiny and identity

- **Awareness**

A key element in this theory is helping the client come to an awareness of what he or she is doing and experiencing

- **The Now**

Our “power is in the present”. The only moment that is significant is the present. For many people the power of the present is lost

Key concepts of Gestalt Therapy

- **Unfinished Business**

Feelings about the past are unexpressed

For Example: hatred, pain, anxiety, grief etc. These feelings are associated with distinct memories & fantasies

Result:

Unexpressed feelings can result in physical symptoms

For Example: Preoccupation, compulsive behavior & self-defeating behavior etc.

So Gestalt therapists emphasize paying attention to the bodily experience

Gestalt View of Human Nature

- Gestalt's basic understanding of the human being is that people can deal with their problems, especially if they become fully aware of what is happening within oneself and outside of oneself
- Change happens in a person's life when he or she can reintegrate a **disowned** part of the self back into the mix of identity
- Gestalt is a process of "**reowning**" parts of the self that have been disowned
- Change takes place when a person is more aware of who and what he or she is

Gestalt View of Human Nature

- Living with “**masks**” and does not promote change
- Problems begin when a person tries to be who or what he or she isn't
- In fact it promotes stagnation of the personality
- According to Gestalt, the more a person tries to be who they are not, the more they stay the same

Therapeutic Goals

- Move towards increased awareness of themselves
- Gradually assume ownership of their experience
- Develop skills and acquire values that will allow them to satisfy their needs without violating the rights of others
- Become more aware of all of their senses
- Learn to accept responsibility for what they do, including accepting the consequences of their actions
- Move from outside support toward increasing internal support
- Be able to ask for and get help from others and to give to others

Therapist's Function and Role

- Therapist encourages the present time, Bring the past into the present by re-enacting it in the present.
- Therapist should focus on the “**what**” & “**how**” of a person without asking the “**why**” questions. This is to promote an awareness of the moment

Questions such as “What is happening now?” or “What are you feeling in this moment?” are used to intensify the experience of the present & create awareness

“Why” questions lead only toward rationalizations and “self-deceptions” away from the immediacy of the moment

- Pay attention to the client's body language.
- Focus on the language

Therapeutic Methods/ Techniques

- **Experiments**

The therapist designs experiments to increase the client's awareness of what he or she is doing, experiencing, and how he or she is doing it.

- **Role-play**

Role-play can help individuals to experience different feelings and emotions and better understand how they present and organize themselves.



• The 'open chair' technique

The open chair technique involves two chairs and role-play, and can give rise to emotional scenes. The client sits opposite an empty chair and must imagine someone (usually himself/herself or parts of him or her) in it. They then communicate with this imaginary being - asking questions and engaging with what they represent. Next, they must switch chairs so they are physically sitting in the once empty chair. The conversation continues, but the client has reversed roles - speaking on behalf of the imagined part of his or her problem.

This technique aims to enable participants to locate a specific feeling or a side of their personalities they had 'disowned' or tried to ignore.

This helps them to accept polarities and acknowledge that conflicts exist in everyone.



- **Dialogue**

A gestalt therapist will need to engage the client in meaningful and authentic dialogue in order to guide them into a particular way of behaving or thinking. This may move beyond simple discussion to more creative forms of expression such as dancing, singing or laughing.

- **Discussing dreams**

Dreams play an important role in gestalt therapy, as they can help individuals to understand spontaneous aspects of themselves. Fritz Perls frequently asked clients to relive his or her dreams by playing different objects and people in the dream. During this they would be asked questions like: "What are you aware of now?" to sharpen self-awareness.



- **Attention to body language**

Throughout therapy, a gestalt therapist will concentrate on body language, which is considered a subtle indicator of intense emotions. When specific body language is noticed, the therapist may ask the client to exaggerate these movements or behaviors. This is thought to intensify the emotion attached to the behavior and highlight an inner meaning.



- **Topdog — Underdog**

A commonly utilized Gestalt technique is that of the topdog-underdog dialogue. This technique is used when the therapist notices two opposing opinions/attitudes within the client. The therapist encourages the client to distinguish between these two parts and play the role of each in a dialogue between them (Patterson, 1986).

The tyrannical ‘topdog’ demands that things be a particular way whilst the ‘underdog’ plays the role of disobedient child. The individual becomes split between the two sides struggling for control.



- **Fantasy**

Fantasy is used in Gestalt Therapy to increase clients' self-awareness of their thoughts and emotions and to bring about closure to unfinished business (Seligman, 2006).

Therapists use guided imagery techniques (fantasy) to encourage clients to imagine situations such as what they would do in a certain situation or by projecting themselves into different roles.



- **The Body as a Vehicle of Communication**

Gestalt Therapy sees that not only are thoughts and emotions important to creating a feeling of “wholeness” for the client, the physical sensations are also important. Seligman (2006) has identified three strategies to help with focusing attention on the physical sensations:

- **Identification**

Gestalt Therapists should be able to recognize physical signs of their clients. For example, a client might be tapping their feet on the ground. The therapist may say “Become your leg and give it a voice?” This creates awareness of the client’s physical sensations and emotions.

- **Locating emotions in the body**

Gestalt Therapists may ask clients where they are experiencing the emotion in their body. For example, a client may say they are feeling nervous about something. The therapist may ask where this is coming from in the body and the response from the client may be that the feeling is butterflies in the stomach. This helps the client to bring about more awareness into sensations and their emotions.

- **Repetition and exaggeration**

If there is repetition such as the example of the client tapping their feet on the ground, the therapist would get them to exaggerate the movement and talk about feelings that come up. This in turn focuses on the emotion and should help to release the blocked awareness.

- **Confusion**

The technique of dealing with confusion of the client is about drawing attention to the client's hesitation in talking about something unpleasant.

The hesitation can be shown through avoidance, blanking out, verbalism and fantasy. By drawing attention to the hesitation, it creates self-awareness for the client and allows the client to work through the issue.



Applications

- It can be applied as a long-term therapy or as a brief and focused approach.
- Originally Gestalt Therapy was predominantly used to treat individuals who were anxious and depressed and who were not showing serious pathological symptoms.
- Personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder.
- Managing tension
- Addiction
- post-traumatic stress
- It is also effective in counseling groups, couples, and families.
- Overall, people who participate in gestalt therapy tend to feel more self-confident, calm and at peace with themselves.

Strengths

- There is empirical research to support Gestalt Therapy and its techniques.
- Gestalt Therapy is equal to or greater than other therapies in treating various disorders, Gestalt Therapy has a beneficial impact with personality disorders, and the effects of therapy are stable.
- Works with the past by making it relevant to the present.
- Versatile and flexible in its approach to therapy. It has many techniques and may be applied to different therapeutic issues.

Weaknesses

- For Gestalt Therapy to be effective, the therapist must have a high level of personal development .
- Effectiveness of the confronting and theatrical techniques of Gestalt Therapy is limited and has not been well established.
- It has been considered to be a self-centered approach which is concerned with just individual development.
- Potential danger for therapists to abuse the power they have with clients (Corey, 2005).
- Lacks a strong theoretical base.
- Deals only with the here and now.
- Does not deal with diagnosis and testing.