

## Gestalt Therapy: Finishing the Unfinished Business

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### Abstract

Gestalt therapy was founded by Frederick “Fritz” Perls and collaborator Laura Perls and Paul Goodman. They provided a sophisticated clinical alternative based on strong theoretical background to the other two prevalent theories of their day: Behaviourism and Classical psychoanalysis. This article aims to explore the underlying basis of techniques and interventions used in gestalt therapy and their application in clinical practice.

**Keywords:** *Gestalt Therapy, Fritz Perls, Gestalt Techniques*

Fritz Perls synthesised Gestalt therapy as a revision of psychoanalysis and it quickly developed as a wholly independent, integrated system [6]. It emphasises experiential and humanistic approach and rejects the dualities of mind and body, body and soul, thinking and feeling, and feeling and action. Perls wrote that human beings are not made up of separate components, that is, mind, body and soul and rather function as a whole. The word Gestalt is of German origin and it itself refers to a “whole, configuration, integration, pattern or form” (Patterson, 1986) [5].

Gestalt therapy is a phenomenological-existential therapy. It teaches clients and therapists the phenomenological method of awareness in which perceiving, feeling and acting are distinguished from interpretation and reshuffling pre-existing attitudes and works with the clients' awareness and awareness skills rather than focusing on the analysis of the unconscious. A gestalt therapist plays an active role and gets personally engaged with the client rather than fostering transference by remaining in the analytic role of neutrality. Gestalt therapy not only develops clients' awareness but also work on their repertoires of awareness and behavioural tools.

Unlike behavior therapy which uses active and personal engagement methods to direct patients towards preset goals, gestalt therapy uses these methods to increase awareness, freedom and self-direction of the client. Therapists and clients are motivated to be creative in doing the awareness work and there are no such prescribed or proscribed techniques in gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy is a truly integrative approach and includes affective, sensory, cognitive, interpersonal and behavioural components (Joyce & Sills, 2009) [2]. The form of Gestalt therapy practiced today has replaced the mechanistic, simplistic, Newtonian system of classical psychoanalysis with a process based postmodern relational field theory. It has synthesised ideas, data and intervention from multiple sources and also, from the original techniques referred to as ‘Gestalt therapy techniques’.

The key elements in gestalt therapy include a **phenomenological basis** where the therapist is seeking to focus on the client's perception of reality, **experiential basis** where the client is asked to come to an understanding about what and how they are thing, feeling and doing

as they interact with the therapist and other people in the world, **existential basis** where the client is encouraged to work in the “here and now” and not in the “there and then” and **awareness** where the client is taught to become more aware and take responsibility for their actions.

### **Holism and Field Theory**

Holism asserts that humans are inherently self-regulating, growth-oriented and that persons and their symptomatology cannot be understood separate from their environment and Field theory is an approach used to understand how one's context influence one's experiences. Einstein's theory of relativity describes field theory in a very refined manner as a theory about the nature of reality and our relationship to reality. Holism and field theory are interrelated in gestalt's therapy. The combination of field theory, holism and gestalt psychology are the foundation for gestalt theory of personality which states that a person exists by differentiating self from others and by connecting self & other.

### **Paradoxical Theory of Change**

This theory is the heart of the gestalt theory approach (Beisser, 1970) [1]. The paradox that it states is that when human beings try to be one who one is not, the more one stays the same. Alternatively, the more one tries to force oneself into a mood that does not fit, the more one is fragmented rather than whole. The knowledge and acceptance of the truth of one's feelings, beliefs, situation and behaviour builds wholeness and support growth.

### **Energy and Blocks to energy**

Gestalt therapists focus on where the energy is in the body, how it is used and how it may be causing a blockage. Blocked energy is a form of resistance, for example, tension in a part of the body, not breathing deeply or avoiding eye contact. Gestalt therapy is about finding and releasing the blockages that may be inhibiting awareness.

### **Unfinished business**

Unfinished business refers to people who do not finish things in their lives and is often related to people with a “growth disorder” (Selingman, 2006) [8] . People with unfinished business often resent the past and because of this are unable to focus on the goals of gestalt therapy is to help people work through their unfinished business and bring about closure.

### **Contact and Resistances to Contact**

Contact means being in touch with what is emerging here and now, from moment to moment. It is the interaction with nature and with other people without losing one's individuality. The resistances to contact are the originally creative defences we develop that prevent us from experiencing the present fully.

### **Layers of Neurosis**

The phony: The client reacts to others in a stereotypical and inauthentic ways, Phobic layer: Avoiding the emotional pain that we would prefer to deny, The impasse: The point

where we are “stuck” in our own maturation. The client becomes stagnant and is not able to grow and develop. The implosive level: Fully experiencing our deadness instead of denying it and The explosive layer: letting go of our phone roles and pretenses which release much energy that we have been holding in.

### **Process of Awareness**

Gestalt therapy focuses on the awareness process which is **the continuum of one's flow of awareness**. People have patterned processes of awareness that become foci for the work of therapy. Careful attention to the sequence of the client's continuum of awareness and observation of nonverbal behaviour can help them realise interruptions of contact and become aware of what has been kept out of awareness and observation of nonverbal behaviour can help a client recognise interruptions of contact and become aware of what has been kept out of awareness. Awareness of awareness can empower by helping clients gain greater access to themselves and clarify processes that had been confusing, improving the accuracy of perception and unblocking previously blocked emotional energy (Joyce & Sills, 2009) [5]. Gestalt therapists model the process of focusing on clients' awareness and contact processes with respect, compassion and commitment to the validity of their experiential reality by being present in a mutual way, being active and disclosing their awareness and experience and being open to learning from the client's perspective.

### **Techniques of Gestalt Therapy**

**Experiments** : Gestalt therapists use the technique of experiments or learning experiences with their clients. The experiments are designed for the individual and take the form of an enactment, role play, homework, or other activity which promotes the individual's self-awareness (Seligman, 2006) [8].

An example of this technique is with a woman who feels insecure in social situations. She has an event at her workplace to go to in two weeks time. Therefore, the therapist gives her the experiment of starting a conversation at the event with someone she does not usually speak to. The reason why these kinds of experimentation work is that when the client spends time thinking about what she might say promotes self-awareness and the experiment in itself helps her in becoming more confident in social situations.

**Guided 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) [8]. 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.

**Hot seat technique** : In this technique, the client sits in a chair next to the therapist, who encourages the client through direct prompting and questioning to relive and re-experience stressful experiences and openly express feelings of discomfort, guilt, or resentment. This technique aims to generate a new, more vivid awareness, which leads the client to find his or her own solutions to problems or emotional difficulties.

**Resentment Expression:** Fritz Perls believed that it was essential to express resentments and if unexpressed can be converted to guilt. Recognising and expressing the resentments can help a client become unstuck and work through unfinished business [6].

**Double Chairing/ Empty Chair:** This technique is based on the concept of polarisation. The concept of polarised self states that sometimes a client can experience two opposing and conflicting parts of the self and this may cause a lot of confusion within the client. In this technique, the therapist places two chairs in front of each other and then the client is instructed to sit in one of the chairs and talk to the empty chair opposite to him/her. It is generally used in a group situation. The therapist may simply observe as the dialogue progresses or may instruct the patient when to change chairs, suggest sentences to say, call the patient's attention to what has been said, or ask the patient to repeat or exaggerate words or actions.

### **Applications of Gestalt Therapy**

Gestalt therapy and methodology both advocate that general principles must be always followed for each particular clinical situation. The choice and execution of techniques can be tailored to fulfil each client's unique needs. Originally Gestalt therapy was predominantly used to treat individuals who were anxious and/or depressed and who were not showing serious pathological symptoms. Although still used in the treatment of anxiety and depression, Gestalt therapy has been effective in treating clients with personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder. Gestalt therapy is also effective in counselling groups, couples, and families.

### **Current Status of Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice**

Gestalt therapy has been used to be very useful for treatment of schizophrenia especially in group settings where the therapist actively engages in interaction with the clients as evident in a study by Kanas (2015) [4], who conducted a review of 43 controlled studies which evaluated the effectiveness of group therapy for schizophrenics. Group therapy was judged to be an effective modality of treatment for schizophrenics in 67 percent of the inpatient studies. It was especially useful in groups lasting more than three months. Therapy groups were effective for schizophrenics in 80 percent of the outpatient studies.

In another study conducted by Saadati and Lashani (2013) [7], the effectiveness of Gestalt therapy on the self-efficacy of divorced women were studied. It was seen that after 12 session gestalt therapy on these women, the results showed significant increase on divorced women self-efficacy in comparison with control group. These days gestalt therapy is also used for relationship therapy as its techniques and methods are quick and easy to use and also enables the clients to focus on the current issue by being present in the here and now.

### **Conclusion**

Gestalt therapy is an amalgam of sensory, cognitive, affective and behavioural components of self. It emphasises on experiencing the self in totality in the "here and now" rather than

in the “there and then” and finding harmony within oneself by getting in touch with one’s reality and resolving one’s unfinished business.

‘Unfinished business’ refers to unexpressed feelings about the past. These feelings can also result in preoccupation, compulsive behaviour, wariness and self-defeating behaviour. These unexpressed feelings often show up in physical symptoms.

Therefore, Gestalt therapists always focus and pay attention to the bodily experience of the client. Resolution of unfinished business is one of the major goals in gestalt therapy as it can linger in the background and interfere with effective contact.

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