

What is Gestalt Therapy?

For each of us, our lived experience includes moments when we are deeply aware of where we have come, what we are going through, and where we are going; however, for many of us, much of our experience is not explicit and is unacknowledged. We are frequently unaware of the ways our historical being, emotional wounds, and unfinished life projects structure our lives. Often, the unawareness of this “unfinished business” structures our meaningful contact with our everyday lives as we seek to bring ongoing past and present experiences to completion. For instance, an employer who is critical of work performance becomes an angry father and we react in familiar and painful ways. We want to finish this experience, to settle the account, but in our individual dramas the players and scenes have changed.

Gestalt therapy is a humanistic approach to psychotherapy – originating with Fritz Perls, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s -- that is linked philosophically with psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology. As a humanistic therapy, gestalt therapy is holistic, which means that human beings are inherently self-regulating, growth-oriented, and motivated to solve their own problems. Gestalt therapy, therefore, is a form of dialogue, and gestalt therapists do not typically give advice, pretend they may perceive a truth the client cannot, or know when someone is behaving or thinking in an irrational way. Many of us experience a sense of confirmation when we are understood for who we are and not who others want us to be, and gestalt therapy is about closely listening and facilitating awareness in terms of a person’s particular lived experience.

For gestalt therapists, mental and emotional suffering are simply painful and individual ways of creatively adjusting to difficult surrounding and circumstances. Under optimum conditions, we know and own what we sense, feel emotionally, observe, need, want or believe; however, at times we develop resistances to our own experience and become blocked. For example, a person whose father dies while she is young may learn from other significant people in her life to distract herself from her own experience of grief or abandonment. In this situation, this person creatively escaped an unbearable emotional suffering by busying herself. As an adult, however, she may continue to engage in this resistance though her relationships and surroundings have changed, and leave important paths of feeling not traveled.

To facilitate the exploration of previously unknown inner landscapes, Gestalt therapists focus on facilitating awareness of here-and-now experience, to what is interesting or energetically charged in a given situation and the resistances to that interest. Gestalt therapists, thus, very often ask their clients to pay attention to feelings, bodily sensations, and to what opposes those feelings and sensations. For instance, if a client becomes tearful, a gestalt therapist may ask him or her to pay attention to how he or she physically constricts or limits the ways he or she expresses emotion. Gestalt therapy is more active than some humanistic approaches and the therapist – with permission from the client -- may direct a client to experiment with certain aspects of his or her experience. For instance, the therapist may suggest that the client conduct a dialogue between two

opposing tendencies, difficult choices, or conflicted feelings. When we are aware of our experiences, and feel safe to explore our needs and interests, it becomes possible to have more freedom in expressing our full range of possibilities.

Gestalt therapy is an exploration rather than an attempt to control a person's behavior, feelings, or thoughts. The only goal is growth and autonomy through an increase in awareness. Because the relationship is primarily an ethical one between two human beings, rather than one of doctor/patient or expert/student, there is no impersonal distance between the client and therapist. Because gestalt is a theory of and approach to human awareness and transformation, and not a philosophy of objective knowledge, the therapist usually discloses or reports his or her experience during the therapy session as his or own reality rather than the truth about the client's reality. In this open and engaged relationship, clients receive honest feedback and can see, hear, and be told how they affect the therapist. Most fundamentally, gestalt therapy is the disciplined practice of interpersonal ethics and dialogue, with awareness and growth as the fruit of the effort.

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