

Fritz Perls - Gestalt

Gestalt therapy is not an intellectual pursuit. It encourages sensing, feeling, doing, perceiving and increasing awareness. Gestalt is concerned with the how, not the why. We do not need to find reasons why things are happening just what is happening now, what its function is now, and whether the individual needs to keep repeating these patterns: or in Gestalt language, whether the individual needs to keep completing the Gestalt they have learned.

This is very much a therapy that deals with the here and now but not in a cognitive way as with CBT. It recognises that patterns may stem from the past, but it equally recognises that the individual operates in their environment here and now too. The idea that the self and environment are linked is central to Gestalt and this also forms a fundamental tenet of Buddhism. Gestalt does not seek to treat the individual in isolation as someone who is nursing a peculiar neurosis or psychosis that has arisen for no obvious reason or for reasons of some dark past. Rather it seeks to contextualise the person and their experience and establish whether the individual is trying to complete some unfinished business in a Gestalt that is unhealthy.

So what does Gestalt mean? Gestalt looks at the whole form, expression and experience of a person. It's German definition is whole, form, or concept but in reality, it is a concept that does not translate succinctly into English. It has been defined as: 'an integrated whole which is greater than the sum of its parts'. Unlike technique driven therapies, it is not focussed on the unconscious (hypnoanalysis), or on the presenting issues (CBT) but rather conceives of the individual as a whole.

Looking into how the term Gestalt applies to specific behaviours, for example, a Gestalt might be: I have an empty feeling in my stomach, it indicates I am hungry. I eat something. I am no longer thinking about food. That is a completed Gestalt. However, let's take for example a person with anorexia. Their link with food has become complex and the idea of the body provoking a physiological need to eat is being interrupted by thoughts and feelings of lack of self worth, self loathing or some such other feeling. In this case the Gestalt tries to complete itself according to the faulty 'logic' that a person has been using. The Gestalt can never in reality be completed in this case as a repetition of the cycle to keep trying to reinforce the logic causes physical and emotional decline.

Perls identified these interruptions as a loss of ego functions:

They are:

- 1.Desensitisation: 'I'm not ill, I can keep going.'
- 2.Deflection: 'I accept neither criticism nor affection'
- 3.Introjection: 'I should always put others first'
- 4.Projection: 'I'm not angry, you're the one who's sulking'
- 5.Retroflexion: 'I must keep this anger in, I would be bad if I showed it'
- 6.Egotism: 'I'm really proud that I've always manage things on my own'
- 7.Confluence: 'We're not a family that likes to show emotion'

These 7 dysfunctional ego functions represent a boundary disturbance. This means I don't see myself as whole: I am invaded by or need to protect myself from others.

Perls was keen to refute that Gestalt had any system of application or any specific techniques that could be applied in all cases. He was quite anarchic in that he was open to exploring the therapeutic relationship as part of the client's experience. He emphasised that the therapist was themselves in the process of learning from the patient and that traffic thereby was two way. With his focus on the

mystical nature of interpersonal or relational aspects of life, Gestalt is essentially a creative therapy. One commentator (Zinker) defines Gestalt therapy as 'permission to be creative.'

The concepts that explain Gestalt are expressed via experiences that occur in the therapy room. So for example it concentrates on attention, self awareness, spontaneity of perception, involvement in experiences, overcoming gaps or distortions in experience which are believed to produce anxiety compulsive behaviour etc. It focuses on the contemporaneous factors that might be supporting neuroses rather than the origin of the neurosis.

Maturation

The Gestalt aim in therapy is to grow up. Many of my clients say they feel they have grown up as a result of being in therapy with me. What do they mean?

Perls formulation is that maturing is the transcendence from environmental support to self support. He rejected the term 'neurosis' as a red herring. He believed that what others called a neurosis is in fact a growth disorder which prevents a person from achieving maturity. Maturity means becoming self responsible, self actualised and realising the individual has the power to transform their own experience. Not reaching maturity means not realising the reality of the here and now, and living still as though you were the helpless child in the there and then. How maturity manifests itself has been expressed in what has become known as the Gestalt Prayer.

I do my thing, and you do yours
I am not in this world to live up to
your expectations and you are not in
this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And, if by any chance we find each other,
It's beautiful
If not, it can't be helped.

The concept of personal responsibility is pivotal to Gestalt therapy. As opposed to encouraging dependency, Gestalt encourages personal responsibility for the client's own behaviour. Depending on the strength of their role playing personas, clients can respond in various ways from aggression, to fear, to indignation to cooperation.

Perls outlines 4 layers of consciousness observed in Gestalt therapy.

1. The Impasse

This is a crucial starting point in the Gestalt approach. It is the point where the way a person has always tried to behave or complete their particular gestalts no longer works. Either environmental support for that behaviour has disappeared or the inner support no longer explains or assists the working of this gestalt. (in my experience this happens when people experience something that throws them out of their usual way of trying to complete their gestalt: say a betrayal challenges everything they knew about keeping themselves safe and then comes the impasse: 'I can't continue to believe that life is a particular way because everything I believed was true has been tested'.)

2. Basic Role playing

The role that is being played, from helpless child, to helpful, caring me and a whole range of others unique to each individual, is a function in consciousness that seeks to control the self.

We may have adopted an idealised concept of the self and then spend our conscious life striving to become the person we feel we should be, rather than being ourselves. The self becomes very strictly controlled and manipulated. When the self is manipulated to meet the needs of the idealised self, this requires that all situations and people be manipulated too. This results in anxiety as the uncontrollable needs to be controlled by the role play self.

3. Anti existence

All pain and feelings are avoided here. We experience nothingness. This is where all ideas of self and impasse are no longer defining who we are. There is a vulnerable emptiness.

4. Implosion

All experience is turned inwards. We blame the self, we hate the self, we find ways to denigrate the self.

Psychodynamic therapists look for causes in the past and seek to resolve them in the past. Gestaltists look for resolution in the present, simply because things that are unfinished in the past have their manifestation in the present. These 'unfinished situations' can cause resentment in the individual which remains alive or active as the original cause is so long ago that it cannot be appropriately expressed any longer. True expression of those feelings in the here and now that completes the gestalt causes the breakthroughs that are being sought. Gestalt is a self actualising phenomenological and existential therapy. The goal is growth and autonomy through an increase in consciousness not a behaviour modification as is the aim with CBT.

The Here and Now

Clues to the past and the kinds of gestalt that a person lives are in a person's every expression in the here and now. The therapist firstly observes the role playing. What feeling do I get when I'm with this client? What kind of role are they playing with me? Who do they think I am? As those thoughts occur, the therapist will start to become aware of the voice that is being used, the breathing, the body language, gestures, facial expressions and ways used to seek a response, the client's demands, and all the unfinished situations from the past are thereby readily available to the therapist.

The therapist's role is to deliberately frustrate the manipulative role playing of the client and refusing to accept them as here and now communication causing the client to become more aware of their blocks. How do you do this?

Be aware of the language people use: You can unwittingly take part in language that indicates role playing selves that have stepped in to protect the true self.

<u>Beware:</u>	<u>Be Aware of:</u>
Why?	How?
Ought	This is how I am
Should	And
Must	That is how you are
Generalities such as: people are so selfish, everytime something goes right this happens, always, never, the whole time, etc.	I, you, now
Can't	Won't

Thoughts	Sensations
Thoughts	Feelings
Thoughts	Images
Questions	You said, 'x y and z' – tell me more.

The style of language on the left is all about prescription and living by rules imposed by the role player on to the self. These are not truisms. They are as the client has internalised their experience and come to believe the world is as it is through their eyes. These are the beliefs that have become shattered or broken and no longer hold onto the individual's experience in the safe way they once did. 'Your pain is but the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding' Kahlil Gibran.

To break through the role play that people bring with them, the therapist must be conscious of the language and behaviour being used and challenge their expression.

The Use of Dreams in Gestalt

Perls believed that dreams express the forbidden aspects of our inner world that our waking reality attempts to subjugate. You can use dreams therapeutically by using the following styles of methods.

1. The client relates the dream as it is remembered.
2. The client is asked to let themselves back into the dream and tell it again in the present tense, as if it is just happening *now*. The task of the therapist is partly to listen with attention to what the dreamer says and how they say it, with regard to what seems to be vivid, devalued, conflicted, left out for them. Focus awareness on their experience.
3. Ask the client what element of the dream in the present stays with them the most at this moment. Perhaps later, asking client to recall whatever element of the dream you heard was the most inanimate. Ask the client to describe themselves as if they are whatever element is being talked about. For example, if it is sadness, How big are you? Colour? Shape? Sound - louder. What part of the dream is the sound relating to? What do you want to do with it? Do it.

The task is to be creative and to allow the client to free-flow through their dream experience. The therapist's task is to get in alongside the dream so that you are looking at it phenomenologically with the same impetus as your client. One of the most abiding guidelines in Gestalt is to stay as close to the present as possible.

Echoes with Hypnotherapy and NLP

Looking at feelings as colours, shapes etc heralds what has later become known as Parts or Conference therapy. Staying in the present tense while exploring these parts maintains the conscious awareness of role playing games that have obscured the true self.

I am directly quoting a resource below which describes more of the gestalt process succinctly Authenticity

Gestalt therapy is an exploration rather than a direct modification of behaviour. The goal is growth and autonomy through an increase in consciousness. The therapist's active presence is alive and

excited (hence warm), honest, direct and authentic. Clients can see, hear and be told how they are experienced, what is seen, how the therapist feels, what the therapist is like as a person. *Growth occurs from real contact with real people.* Clients learn how they are seen and how their awareness process is limited, not primarily by talking about their problems, but by how they and their therapist engage each other. Focusing ranges from simple empathy to exercises arising mostly from the therapist's phenomenology while with the client. Everything is secondary to the direct experience of both participants. Exploration of a client's problem(s) is facilitated in ways that maximise what continues to develop after the session has ended. The client is often left unfinished but thoughtful or 'opened-up', or with an assignment. We facilitate growth rather than complete a cure process: this is in part why Gestalt therapy can be so intensive over fewer sessions. An example of this 'unfinished' work is shown below:

Therapist: "You sound not only angry but something more?"
Client: *[looks interested]*
Therapist: "you sound and look like you are enraged"
Client: "I am, I would like to kill him"
Therapist: "Impotence usually accompanies rage. What are you impotent about?"
Client: "I can't get him to acknowledge me"
Therapist: "And you don't accept that"
Client: "No"
Therapist: "And there is an intensity to your rage that seems to be greater than the Situation calls for"
Client: *[nods and pauses]*
Therapist: "What are you experiencing?"

Client: "A lot of men in my life have been like that"
Therapist: "Okay, let's leave it at this point. Maybe you would like to think about some of the men that have treated you this way and we can discuss this at your next session?"
[From previous exploration, the therapist suspects that the client has a childhood conflict with her father]

Two Chair Work

Gestalt therapy can be warm, and sometimes confrontational. Sometimes it can be very confrontational. Its design is to pull people out of their habitual ways of being which can be very uncomfortable. Two Chair work, or Empty Chair work, is a key part of Gestalt therapy to encourage the client to experience and, therefore, to become more consciously aware. This can be done by imagining the client's troublesome relationship with someone is being played out with them in an imaginary chair or with an imaginary object, such as a doll or teddy bear. Sometimes however, it is best to surprise the client into experiencing the situation, similar to that shown in the dialogue described below.

Therapist: "What are you doing now?"
Janet: "Trying to stop my teeth from chattering"
Therapist: "Why are your teeth chattering?"
Janet: "Because I don't like this feeling of fear that I have now."
Therapist: "What do you imagine?"
Janet: "Ridicule"
Therapist: "Okay. Imagine that I'm Janet and start ridiculing me now. Go on, don't think about it, take the piss out of me!"
Janet: "Janet, you're ridiculous. You're fat... you're lazy. You're just comic."

You're pretending to be a grown up and you're not. Everybody knows that you're a kid inside, masquerading as a 39 year-old woman and it's a ridiculous disguise. You haven't any business being 39. A ridiculous age. You're comic. You have a job you don't have the remotest idea how to do. You're making all kinds of grandiose plans that you haven't brains enough to carry out and people are going to be laughing at you."

Therapist: "Okay. Look at me. Am I laughing at you?"

Janet: "Well. No."

Therapist: "So who is laughing at you?"

Janet: "I guess. . . it's my fantasy"

Therapist: "Who creates your fantasy, Janet?"

Janet: "I do."

Therapist: "So who's laughing at you?"

Janet: "Yeah. That's it. I'm really laughing at what's not funny. I'm so damned incompetent. *[pause]*"

Therapist: "What are you really good at?"

Janet: "I'm good with people. I'm not judgmental. I'm good at housekeeping. I'm a good cook. I'm good at interior design."

Therapist: "Maybe you'll make someone a good partner, Janet?"

The essence of Gestalt is to stay in the here and now with the client and do what feels right in terms of empty chair work or two chair work. Staying in the here and now forces the client to think more consciously about their relationships with people instead of replaying old beliefs and old systems again and again. This you can use in your hypnotherapy interventions if you know how to work with your feelings and your clients feelings in the here and now.