

HYPNOSIS and Other Stories

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CHAPTER 13 : Gestalt Therapy: Be Here Now

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Monica Geers Dahl

“If we cannot understand ourselves, we can never hope to understand what we are doing, never hope to solve our problems, we can never hope to live rewarding lives” (Perls, 1976, p.2).

The German word *gestalt* means a unified whole, a perceptual whole that cannot be defined by the sum of its parts. *Ungestalt* is a deformity of the whole. Gestalt Therapy was developed by Fritz and Laura Perls in response to what they perceived to be flaws in Freudian Psychoanalysis (too lengthy, too much interpretation) and Behavior Therapy (fails to address thoughts, feelings, decision, and values). Wilhelm Reich's theory of character body armor provides a phenomenological foundation for Gestalt Therapy.

The first assumption of Gestalt is that an individual cannot be truly known and understood outside of context. The Gestalt is the entire picture, individual in context, with a biological, unfolding organismic process. The emergent need comes from the unified whole to be a figure in the foreground of awareness. When that need is resolved satisfactorily, it slips into the background to be assimilated, and the next pressing need emerges from the background to become the foreground figure. We are led through life aroused by authentic, emergent needs.

The healthy, mature individual has learned to find internal support, the immature individual is still leaning on external support to replace what that person perceives to be insufficient internal resources to cope with the emergent need(s). The purpose of Gestalt Therapy is to throw the client back on her or her own resources, to discover that he or she is already resource rich within. Gestalt therapy seeks to frustrate the desire for external support of neurotic patterns, while providing external support for authentic encounters of real feelings, in contrast to the mind games of “should” and “ought to”. Pay attention to the obvious.

What am I aware of right now?

We are split into you and I. Gestalt Therapy is an experiential process of encountering oneself and Other. In order to live authentic, genuine lives, an individual must be in contact with his or her own senses.

How am I aware of me? I am now aware of . . .

Without a genuine contact with authentic needs being expressed, it is difficult to have an authentic, genuine connection with the world. The contact boundary between self and oneself, and between self and Other, are the areas of awareness and lack of awareness of interest to Gestalt Therapy.

How am I aware of you? I am now aware of . . .

Perls drew from the character body armor theory of Wilhelm Reich, and uses proprioceptive awareness to resolve the proposed lack of authentic and genuine experiences of emergent phenomenon Here and Now. Proprioception is the body's awareness of position and movement. Learning and discovery may require an initial focus of awareness of the body's activities, such as riding a bike, and when the body masters the activity, full awareness of body movement is no longer needed, so proprioceptive awareness for that task slips out of conscious awareness and into automatic behavior. Pay attention to the obvious. Gestalt Therapy is intended to restore an individual's awareness of what is happening right Here and Now.

Perls proposed that anxiety is the stagnant, repressed energy stuck between authentic living Now and Here, and some abstract concept of "future" that has not yet arrived. It occurs because the individual does not know what role is expected, wants to learn, and doesn't know how. There are unresolved Gestalts mucking up the decision-making process of being fully Here and Now. When the senses are retracted from the fears of the unknown future, the individual generally finds that there is nothing to fear here and now, and that the anxiety is gone. The energy of living is fully engaged in an authentic encounter with the Here and Now.

The material brought into a session by a client includes ALL the unfinished business / Gestalt. Of all the unfinished Gestalts, the client picks out the most pressing issue to present to the clinician. The emergent issue is the figure / foreground, the

context is the background. When the foreground figure is resolved to the client's satisfaction, the figure recedes into the background, and the next pressing need emerges. Awareness and attention are drawn by that which of interest to the client. The focus of attention is what allows a figure or image to emerge from the background context. The figure in the foreground is what we are aware of. The process of awareness is led by needs, biological needs and survival issues take priority, first things first. When the prioritized need is resolved, a Gestalt is complete, and the foreground sinks into the background for assimilation.

We are aware of that which is of interest to our most pressing needs, seek the resources to fill the emergent needs, and the other resources recede into the background. The choice of what to be aware of is the composite of many needs and personal interest. The process of achieving our biological needs is known as metabolism, we expend energy achieving our needs. Problems arise when multiple needs present themselves and there is conflict in discerning what is the most pressing need. Sometimes the needs are in direct opposition to each other. This is where the process of shuttling allows a person to discover the polarized demands. The client shuttles back and forth between the opposing demands, initiating a dialogue between the conflicting needs. In modern hypnotherapy practices, this technique of Gestalt Therapy is taught as Parts Therapy. Mark Gilboyne studied with Fritz Perls at Esalen, Charles Tebbetts studied with Gilboyne, and Roy Hunter is a student of both Tebbetts and Gilboyne. Parts Therapy is a technique founded in the Gestalt Therapy of Fritz Perls.^{8,9}

Humans have a biological capacity for adaptation, and homeostasis. Homeostasis is the process of satisfying emergent needs. Each emergent need disrupts the existing balance, pushing the individual to reach for resources to resolve the pressing need. As a need is resolved, it sinks into the background for assimilation and adaptation. This is the self-regulating, learning and discovery process of balance (*gestalt*) and imbalance (*ungestalt*) in living. Self-regulation requires awareness of all

⁸ 2022 Modern interpretation of Gestalt Parts Therapy is found in Internal Family Systems Therapy, developed by Richard Schwartz. More information about IFS can be found at <https://ifs-institute.com/>

⁹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/internal-family-systems-therapy>

the presenting issues, and determining which pressing need comes first. The body naturally has a biological hierarchy of needs and values. The body attends to dominant survival needs first.

In addition to biological homeostasis, humans have a capacity to think and use abstract symbols. Thinking is a process that occurs out of sight, it includes dreaming, fantasizing, planning, rehearsing, deciding, choosing, valuing, finding meaning. Awareness is an inner process of perceiving with the senses: sight, sound, touch / feeling, taste, and smell. Thinking and perceiving are useful in creating the most efficient use of perceived needs and resources required to fill those needs. Behaving is a thinking and awareness process that has been made observable. Sometimes thought and awareness deliberately turn into action. Sometimes behavior is spontaneous, such as jumping out of the path of an oncoming car. Behaving is acting upon the environment in such a way as to manipulate environmental resources and bring about a satisfactory closure to an unresolved Gestalt. As a particular need is resolved, the Gestalt is finished, and the need ceases to be foreground, it slips into the background for assimilation, and is replaced by the next emergent need, or dissatisfaction.

Each generation carries the symbols and patterns of living gifted from preceding generations. These social pressures create external demands on the individual's awareness, resources, and adaptation. The question arises over how a person chooses to adapt, is it an inner self awareness, an awareness of social pressures, or a balance between the two? Sometimes an individual is unable to fill his or her own needs because he or she has never learned to be authentic. Perhaps they have accepted external demands as more relevant than internal demands. The resulting lack of orientation and imbalance leads to sickness.

The unbalanced human, who perceives him or herself as lacking the internal resources to restore balance, ideally seeks therapy to restore his or her orientation and balance. Perls proposed that many clients seek therapy to become more successful in sustaining their existing neurotic strategies that have put their own lives out of balance. It is too frightening to be fully responsible, mature humans, it is easier throwing themselves on the therapist, seeking external support for learning how to more

effectively lead their dysfunctional lives. Noticing when a person is giving up personal responsibility for being aware and making wise choices is a primary target of Gestalt methods. How does the person interrupt his or her own natural processes of awareness, thereby limiting awareness of choices? The Gestalt Therapy approach is to throw the client back on his or her own resources, frustrating the individual's neurotic intentions to avoid living a full, authentic life.

The contact boundary between the individual and the environment is a site of potential conflict. The conflict is a point of intervention. Is this an internal conflict, or is it an external conflict? When there is a conflict, what does the human respond to? The internal pressures, or the external pressures? The goal of Gestalt is to assist the individual in orienting himself or herself, discover what is wanted / needed, in such a way that the Gestalt is satisfied, and the story is finished in a manner the individual finds satisfactory. If attention / awareness is split between multiple demands, it may not be possible to focus or pay attention to what is most important. The conflict tends to be a polarized demand from multiple sources which the person describes as confusion. The neurotic is a person who has failed to develop or use his or her ability to prioritize in accordance with a healthy hierarchy of needs.

The human organism has a natural rhythm of moving toward and moving away from, engagement and disengagement, connecting and withdrawing. In order to have healthy interactions, the individual has to use or develop the ability to use awareness of needs and resources, a recognition of when to approach and when to withdraw without losing awareness of the full value of both the individual and the environment. If a person is unable to exercise a natural rhythm of connecting and withdrawing, the disturbances in the contact boundary interfere with the natural process of maturity and self-support. The individual is still confused about the relationships with self and with others. A mature, self-supporting individual has learned to adapt, discover, and fill the emergent needs.

A neurotic lives "through the glass darkly" because he is in an existential crisis, he cannot fill or cannot recognize his own needs. When personal needs, which are as vital as breathing, are not being filled by the current activities, thoughts, and

environmental resources, the immature client wants to have his or her needs filled by external support. The person does not view their personal resources as sufficient; they consider themselves as having insufficient resources to address the emergent needs. Gestalt works on the idea that the person is resource rich. A person does not come into clinical care without resources. The person struggling with unfilled needs has developed, cultivated, identified and used all the tools of manipulation that they have adapted to engaging the external world. The tools to manipulate the outside world are propping up their misperception of having insufficient internal coping tools, masking their true inner strengths and resource rich inner world, their authentic self.

If thoughts and behaviors are considered a part of the greater whole, mental and physical activities are different aspects of the same being. Thoughts manifest as behavior, pay attention to the overt behavior (actions) and you will find a link to the covert behavior (thinking / feeling). The Gestalt Therapy approach is that the individual knows what his actions and thoughts mean, and it is the clinician's role to bring those things to the client's awareness. Between thinking and doing is a middle ground of "playing at". There are four primary games people play to avoid personal responsibility; all involve boundary conflicts and confusions: Topdog / Underdog, Projection, Introjection, and Confluence.

Topdog / Underdog is a polarized battle between a person or aspect of self and another person or aspect of self. The Topdog is a perfectionistic blow hard that knows how everything is supposed to be done correctly. The Topdog demands that the world, other people, and oneself live up to his or her unrealistic expectations of perfection. The Underdog is a person or aspect of self that plays poor pity me, I'm incompetent, I would do it if I could, but I can't, well maybe tomorrow or the next day. The Topdog is direct in his or her demands. The Underdog cries, cowers, whimpers, makes excuses, and tends to win the battle because this aspect or person is more covert and cunning.

Projection is a way of rejecting aspects of oneself that one finds distasteful, pushing those bad behaviors out of oneself and onto the people and environment in which the individual is embedded. The person perceives in others what he or she refuses to see in self.

Introjection is a way of taking into oneself those aspects of the world that other people and environmental pressures impose on the individual. The person does to oneself what others want or have done to that person.

Confluence is a way of becoming one with others, and the environment, that fails to create a personal and authentic orientation to one's own needs. This person has not yet developed a sense of orientation about what is beneficial or detrimental to oneself, and is led by the dominant energies of the environment and others whether or not it is healthy to do so.

A target of clinical interest in Gestalt is the idea of figure / foreground and background. The figure which has emerged from the background of the Gestalt into the foreground of the Gestalt, and the relationship between the foreground and background start a process of self-understanding. The emergent figure of interest in Gestalt is indicator to the client of some unfinished story, *ungestalten*. Let the client tell the story. Pay attention to the first few sentences, and listen for the areas in which the client is trying to give up personal responsibility for the story. A maturing individual has good internal resources, and assumes responsibility for resolving the pressing needs of the emergent figure. An immature individual seeks external support because of a self-perception, a misperception, that they are lacking sufficient internal resources to resolve the presenting problem.

The individual is generally unaware of the ways he or she interrupts the natural processes of homeostasis, adaptation, assimilation and discovery. The confusion of the client is an indication of the individual's disrupted orientation. Confusion is very uncomfortable. Some people find it easier to give up personal responsibility to another person for decision making than to cultivate patience and sit through the confusion, bearing witness to the unfolding story. Giving up personal responsibility means that they are never responsible for their failures, or successes. Refusing to be responsible for finding and maintaining orientation and balance pushes the client away from effective coping strategies due to refusal to sit with the discomfort of confusion.

Confusion is a lovely indicator that multiple needs are clashing in and around that individual. A person who is out of balance, lacks orientation, cannot discern what the

most pressing need is, will express a sense of confusion. This is good. The goal of Gestalt Therapy is to help the client learn how to orient more authentically Here and Now. Through becoming more aware of Here and Now, the person becomes more aware of how they interrupt themselves. The awareness of self interruption results in an increased awareness of choices that had previously been screened out of awareness. Confusion can be a disguise where the real story gets stuffed under the rug, ignored. Sitting patiently through the confusion, willingly listening to all the different parts, allows for increasing maneuverability in obtaining resources related to authentic needs.

The chaos / confusion is an excellent tool for practicing “shuttling”, which is a shifting of perspectives between conflicting demands and needs. The human mind understands things in context. An issue will have a polarized opposite by which the client fully knows and understands the presenting problem.

Confusion is uncomfortable, a person may try and escape the confusion, throwing his or her needs on the external world for decision making and interpretations. Sitting with confusion requires courage, and then comes the amazing discovery that confusion changes when a person is willing to sit with it. Confusion does not last, the *ungestalt* will push the environment for a figure to arise from the background to the foreground to express the unfilled need. Sitting with the confusion, instead of running from it with interpretations, explanations, redirections, will result in a discovery of internal resources that had been overlooked in the initial experience of confusion. Each time a person has the courage to go into the junkyard that is confusion, and sit with it, that person will emerge stronger, with resources that were already present within themselves.

Each satisfactory encounter with confusion makes the next encounter easier. This capacity to engage in confusion, patiently experiencing the frustration or chaos of not knowing, becomes a mature life process that generalizes to healthier life choices outside of the therapy room.

Have the client tell the story of personal awareness Here and Now from a first-person perspective,

“I am now experiencing . . .” becoming more aware of personal abilities and capacities. This strategy reveals the individual’s present resources, and opens alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

“I am aware . . .” helps reveal the unfinished business or incomplete event that is pressing for a satisfactory resolution.

The individual’s behavior (*hands, feet, breathing, body posture, vocal activity and tones, pauses, “ahs” and “ums”*) are useful in showing how the individual is communicating and interrupting his or her natural processes. The neurotic self-interrupts the natural rhythm of expansion and contraction, coming together and pulling apart. A natural organic rhythm is a process involving recognition of emergent needs, and the means (internal and external) of satisfying those needs.

“Understanding means . . . seeing a part in its relation to the whole. . . seeing themselves as part of the total field and thus becoming related to themselves and to the world. This is good contact” (Perls, 1976, p.73).

Everything the person does is an expression of self, concealed and obvious. When the client starts talking about others, future orientation, past regrets, pay attention to what the body is doing and bring that activity to the client’s awareness.

“Are you aware of _____ (your voice, your hand, your foot, etc.)?”

“Be the _____ (voice, hand, foot, etc.) and tell me your story.”

“If you could speak to _____ (client’s name), what would you say?”

We are driven internally by a biological wisdom about what we need to be satisfied, to have a complete process, a closed Gestalt. Between thinking and acting is a middle ground. The space between me and my environment is a point of contact, a boundary between me and Other. The encounter between you and me, me and Other, can be pleasant or unpleasant. The pleasant encounters are considered positive, nourishing, normal behaviors. The unpleasant encounters are considered negative, toxic, abnormal behaviors. Biologically, even amoebas tend to move toward that which is nourishing and away from that which is toxic.

Avoid “why?”, because it generates justifications, rationalizations, explanations for what has caused the event(s), it does not provide solutions. What and How reveal the structure of the process. Awareness of the structure, and how a person interrupts his or her own internal orientation, yields greater maneuverability for accessing needed resources.

Exercise:

“Now I am aware. . .”

When awareness increases, orientation and maneuverability increase.

We want to learn:

What do you want?

What are you doing?

What are you feeling?

What are you avoiding?

What are you expecting?

What are you demanding?

What happens when there are conflicting needs between one’s own needs and the needs of others, or society at large?

When a person is insensitive to needs, neurotic and criminal behavior can unfold. Criminal behavior is that lack of concern or awareness of the needs of others, and the environment at large, leading an individual to infringe upon others, taking without regard for the needs of others. When a person tolerates being infringed upon by others, or by the environment, that person has a lack of concern or awareness of his or her own needs, which is referred to as neurotic. A healthy interaction creates mutually beneficial behaviors and actions for all involved parties.

Do we stop at the edge of the skin?

What about the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we consume? All of these things we need to survive demonstrated how interconnected a human is with his environment. We don't completely end at the edges of our skin. That which is nourishing is considered valuable, attractive, that which is toxic is considered poisonous, repulsive. It is healthy for a person to understand what is healthy and what is toxic. It is natural for a person to learn these things through learning, discovery.

Not only is there an "edge of the skin" identity, there is the community identity that creates contact boundaries and encounter opportunities. The contact boundary between self and other is where an individual seeks to have a healthy coming together and pulling apart. Biological living involves a circular pattern of approaching and withdrawing, engaging and disengaging. This is both something a person does within him or herself, and with others in the larger world. The patterns of self-awareness tend to mimic the patterns of other awareness.

Become more aware of your preferences:

What / who is similar to or like me?

What is there here that fills my needs?

What / who is "other" than me, different from or not like me?

What is there here that repulses me or drains my resources with no equitable exchange?

What I want / need from the world is viewed as a positive experience. What I do not want / do not need from the world is a less desirable experience. It is natural and authentic to move toward that which is wanted / needed, and away from that which is viewed as less desirable. By being aware, spontaneous, engaged with each unfolding moment, it is simple to move toward that which is perceived to be desirable and away from that which is undesirable. Being one's authentic self means paying attention to oneself, listening to and understanding one's needs and wants, pleasure and pains. Being authentic does not mean ignoring others, to be a healthy, mature human

indicates a capacity to live in community, recognize the opportunities and limitations present in the environment, and the needs / wants of other beings.

So, what about parts of ourselves that are less than noble? (projection).

What about the ideas of others that do not completely fit our own ideas and values? (introjection).

What happens when the demands of the environment, others, and my own demands are in conflict? How do I decide what is most valuable, how do I prioritize what is foreground, and what is background? Conflict pinpoints the incomplete Gestalt, *ungestalten*, the unfinished business.

Am I being authentic? Am I aware of my senses, or am I running a game on myself? (Topdog/Underdog, Projection, Introjection, Confluence, Rehearsing, Should and Ought to, etc.). A game is a learned behavior that is perceived to have a capacity to provide and manipulate existing resources to support me in my needs. Awareness is a proprioceptive awareness of the senses: What do I see, hear, feel, smell, and taste? Proprioceptive awareness and memories do not occur in "time" other than Here and Now. Focus on the senses, put aside the games, thinking, planning, rehearsing, etc.

I am now aware . . .

I am now . . .

Authentic, mature living is an unfolding process of self-support. The immature human seeks environmental support because the internal support system is not yet fully developed. The mature human seeks environmental support because there is pleasure and discovery in sharing life in community with other mature, creative, wise, authentic individuals. A society of mature individuals will prioritize in the same authentic manner as skills developed by each individual.

"When it is fully engaged in Being Present in this moment, in this situation, there is no anxiety, only fully engaged, authentic living. When the person is unsure of what role is expected, this energy becomes stagnant, this is anxiety. The vital life force is not flowing into the appropriate engagement with life, and the heart races. The gap

between Now and Then is filled with stagnant energy. The solution is to be fully present NOW, and to act in response to the present situation with spontaneity. This is the creative, open eyed, authentic response of childlike wonder. Your senses are open, your senses are ready, you are ready, you are fully present, aware, and real” (Perls, 1972).

We cannot know ourselves only in relation with others, we must know ourselves in relation with self.

I am now aware of . . .

I now feel . . .

I now hear . . .

I now see . . .

I now smell . . .

I now taste . . .

References

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IMDHA Resources

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The International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association can help you find hypnosis practitioners, training in hypnosis, events, a virtual library and an online store.

There are four types of membership providing access to tens of thousands of hypnosis and other articles for human health and well-being: associate, student, certified, and educator.

“The International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association is a Referral Service dedicated to providing the community with excellently trained Certified Hypnotherapists. IMDHA Practitioners work harmoniously with allied healthcare professionals to aid individuals in dealing with specific challenges and procedures.

Our objective is to help create a sense of peace and harmony within the individual so that the current challenge can be met and dealt with in a positive manner, thus making the journey toward wellness and peace of mind less traumatic.

Our goal is to reduce the stress the individual is experiencing as a hospital patient and / or surgical patient, etc. Less stress allows the body to focus attention on its natural course of healing. The method to be used is hypnosis.

In addition to medical challenges, all IMDHA members assist persons in dealing effectively with non-medical problems. Finding solutions to self-sabotaging habits leads to peace of mind and control of unwanted, negative behavior. Self Empowerment is the goal.

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