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Unit – 3: Gestalt Therapy and Reality Therapy

Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy is a humanistic, holistic, person-centered form of psychotherapy that is focused on an individual's present life and challenges rather than delving into past experiences. This approach stresses the importance of understanding the context of a person's life and taking responsibility rather than placing blame.

It can be a little intimidating to consider starting therapy, especially if you imagine yourself sitting in the therapy room talking about the past. Although revisiting the past is an important part of identifying what needs to be healed, Gestalt therapy is an approach that focuses more on the "here and now" experience of the client.

What Does Gestalt Mean?

Gestalt, by definition, refers to the form or shape of something and suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There is an emphasis on perception in this particular theory of counseling. Gestalt therapy gives attention to how we place meaning and make sense of our world and our experiences.

Within Gestalt therapy, the client has space to safely explore their experiences without fear of judgment. In fact, the clients are encouraged to not simply talk about their emotions or experiences, but to bring them into the room so they can be processed in real-time with the therapist.

A Different Approach

Based on Gestalt psychology, this type of therapy was introduced in the 1940s to be an alternative to more traditional psychoanalysis. Gestalt therapy was developed by Fritz Perls, with the help of his wife at the time, Laura Perls. Both Fritz and Laura were trained in psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology.

Along with others, such as Paul Goodman, they worked together to develop a style of therapy that was humanistic in nature. In other words, the approach focused on the person and the uniqueness of their experience.

Some therapy approaches tend to focus on the therapist as an expert on distress and symptoms. The client has more of a learning role, as the therapist shares their knowledge about what they are experiencing and how to heal.

The goal of Gestalt therapy is for the client to collaborate with the therapist to increase personal awareness and actively challenge the roadblocks that have been getting in the way of healing until now.

Uses and Benefits

There are a variety of conditions that Gestalt therapy may be used to treat, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Low self-efficacy
- Low self-esteem
- Relationship problems

Gestalt therapy can also be useful for helping people gain greater self-awareness and a greater ability to live in the present moment.

Other potential benefits may include:

- An improved sense of self-control
- Better ability to monitor and regulate mental states
- Better awareness of your needs
- Better tolerance for negative emotions
- Improved communication skills
- Improved mindfulness
- Increased emotional understanding

Key Ideas

There are a number of principle ideas that come into play with Gestalt therapy, including the following:

Experience Influences Perception

In this client-centered approach to therapy, the Gestalt therapist understands that no one can be fully objective and that we are influenced by our environment and our experiences. A therapist trained in Gestalt Therapy holds space for their clients to share their truth, not imposing their judgment and accepting the truth of their clients' experiences.

Since therapists are human as well, it is important for Gestalt therapists to consider the influence of their own experiences on what is happening in the session.

Context Matters

When in session, Gestalt therapists want to learn about the experience of their clients. It is understood that context matters and the therapists use techniques to help the client become more aware of their experiences, their perceptions, and their responses to events in the here and now.

Rather than specifically targeting the past and asking clients to purposefully bring up old experiences, Gestalt therapists operate from a place of understanding that as clients become increasingly aware, they will overcome existing roadblocks. There is no forced work or technique, just holding space for client awareness is key in this approach.

The Present

The main hallmark of Gestalt therapy is the focus on the present. In the session, the client and therapist rapport is critical in building trust and safety. As the client shares, a Gestalt therapist will help bring the client back to the present if there is a sense they are spending too much time in the past or if their anxiety may be speeding them into the future.

An example of keeping a client present might include something like asking about a client's facial expression or body language as they process a particular event or experience.

In asking about something they are observing in the room, they are helping the client come back to the present and process what is happening for them at that moment.

Staying in the present can sound deceptively simple. How hard can it be to stay present, right? Well, if you have ever found yourself worrying about work while making a grocery list, or reminiscing about a past event while sitting with your family at the dinner table, you can understand how quickly we might venture off in our minds while in a therapy session.

Working Through Pain

We work very hard to survive painful experiences, and part of this survival technique is to attempt to shut down our emotional hurt or painful memory of the event. In Gestalt therapy, you are offered a space where you don't have to do that hard work anymore.

This isn't to suggest that things will come up quickly, but they don't have to. A Gestalt therapist understands that things such as painful memories or events will come to awareness when the client is ready for healing in that area.

Self-Awareness

During Gestalt therapy, there may be some experiential exercises that you will do with your therapist. Experiential exercise refers to therapeutic activities done in therapy that can help to

increase awareness and help with processing. At the heart of Gestalt therapy is awareness. As Frederick Salomon Perls put it, "Awareness in itself is healing."

Rather than sitting still and talking, you may be asked to actively participate in something like role play, guided imagery, or use of props to help communication and understanding.

Engaging in experiential exercises can be a wonderful way to open up and share, especially when it is difficult to find words or when you tend to process in a more visual way. Gestalt therapists understand that these exercises help to increase awareness.

Gestalt Exercises

Below are common exercises used in Gestalt therapy:

Words and Language

The attention to language and tone is important in Gestalt therapy. As clients learn to accept responsibility, they learn to use language that reflects a sense of personal ownership rather than focusing on others. For example, rather than say, "If he didn't do that I wouldn't get so mad!" a client might be encouraged to say, "I feel mad when he does that because it makes me feel insignificant and I don't like that."

The use of "I" statements are important in Gestalt therapy.

Empty Chair

This is a role-playing exercise that allows a client to imagine and participate in a conversation with another person or another part of themselves. Sitting across from the empty chair, the client enters into a dialogue as if they were speaking with that other person or that other part of themselves.

Empty chair can be very helpful in drawing out important perceptions, meanings, and other information that can help clients become more aware of their emotional experience and how to start healing.

Role Play

Another example of role-playing might be what is referred to as "top dog and underdog." In this, it is recognized that a client has different parts of self. Similar to the empty chair, the client speaks as both the top dog, which is the more demanding side of their personality and the underdog, which is the more submissive and obedient side of their personality.

The key is to become aware of inner conflicts so that the person can better learn how to integrate these parts of self into a more complete whole.

Body Language

During a session, it might be noticed by a Gestalt therapist that the client is tapping their foot, wringing their hands, or making a certain facial expression. The therapist is likely to mention their observation of this and ask what is happening for the person at that moment.

Incorporating language, the Gestalt therapist may even ask the client to give their foot, hands, or facial expression a voice and speak from that place.

Exaggeration

In addition to giving body language a voice, a Gestalt therapist may inquire about the client's body language. If it is difficult for the client to find words to put to what is happening, they may be asked to exaggerate that motion or repeat it several times in a row for a period of time during the session to draw out some of their experience in the counseling room in that moment.

The client and the therapist get a chance to process emotions and how the person might have learned to disconnect their emotional experiences with their physical experiences.

Locating Emotion

During a session, it is common for people to talk about emotion. Talking about emotion is different than experiencing an emotion, which is what the Gestalt therapist is wanting the client to do in sessions. As a client talks about emotion, the therapist may ask them where they feel that emotion in their body.

An example of this could be, "a pit in my stomach," or "my chest feels tight." Being able to bring the emotional experience to awareness in the body helps the client stay present and process their emotions more effectively

Creative Arts

Additional activities such as painting, sculpting, and drawing can also be used to help people gain awareness, stay present, and learn how to process at the moment. It is generally noted in this style that any technique that can be offered to the client, other than traditional sitting still and talking, can be quite helpful in allowing them to become more aware of themselves, their experiences, and their process of healing.

How It Helps

The following are some of the potential benefits of Gestalt therapy:

Collaborative Relationship

Gestalt therapy intends for the client to gain greater awareness of their experience of being in the world. Gestalt therapists do not have a goal of changing their clients. In fact, clients are encouraged to focus on becoming more aware of themselves, staying present, and processing things in the here and now.

The working, collaborative relationship between therapist and client is powerful to the healing process in Gestalt therapy.

Moving Blocks

It is suggested that the way we learn how to survive experiences, particularly painful experiences, is to create blocks or push things out of awareness so that we can move forward. As effective as it may seem, it can create trouble for us as we become more compartmentalized and fragmented in our sense of self and our experiences.

The very techniques we once used to help ourselves become blocks to self-awareness and growth. Increasing client awareness allows for these blocks to be identified, properly challenged, and moved out of the way so we can find healing and personal growth.

Personal Responsibility

A key goal in Gestalt therapy is to allow clients the opportunity to own and accept their experiences. In blaming others, we lose our sense of control and become victim to the event or the other person involved in the event. Gestalt therapy encourages clients to challenge those old ways of how we may have created meaning about an experience.

Learning how to accept and embrace personal responsibility is a goal of Gestalt therapy, allowing clients to gain a greater sense of control in their experiences and to learn how to better regulate their emotions and interactions with the world.

Self-Regulation and Growth

Gestalt therapy suggests that, inherently, people strive for self-regulation and growth. However, we sometimes develop techniques to emotionally survive unfortunate and painful experiences. Some of these techniques feel helpful in the short-term because they can help minimize our pain or distress.

However, over the long-term, they leave us in more emotionally shaky places, unable to express ourselves. We may find it hard to interact with others, and difficult to learn how to effectively regulate ourselves and be whole, responsible beings.

Gestalt therapy believes that, despite some of these setbacks, people are still wired for this sense of wholeness and feel distressed when we are not able to achieve it. Our distress might look like physical illness, emotional reactivity, isolation, and more.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Gestalt therapy has both some pluses and minuses. Research suggests that it can be effective for treating a variety of conditions including anxiety and personality disorders and is at least as effective as other psychotherapy approaches.

Some potential weaknesses of Gestalt therapy are the fact that it requires a therapist to have a high degree of personal development and only focuses on the present.

Reality Therapy:

Reality therapy, developed by Dr. William Glasser in 1965, is founded on the principles of choice theory and has developed into a widely recognized form of therapy. Parents as well as many professionals in the fields of education, mental health, and social services have embraced the fundamentals of this therapy, which suggests that all human issues occur when one or more of five basic psychological needs are not met and that an individual can only control their own behavior. Glasser believed that when someone chooses to change their own behavior rather than attempting to change someone else's, they will be more successful at attaining their own goals and desires.

Understanding Reality Therapy

Reality therapy focuses on current issues affecting a person seeking treatment rather than the issues the person has experienced in the past, and it encourages that person to use therapy to address any behavior that may prevent them from finding a solution to those issues. This type of therapy encourages problem solving and is based on the idea that people experience mental distress when their basic psychological needs have not been met. These needs are:

- **Power:** A sense of winning, achieving, or a sense of self-worth.
- **Love and belonging:** To family, to a community, or to other loved ones.
- **Freedom:** To be independent, maintain personal space, autonomy.
- **Fun:** To achieve satisfaction, enjoyment, and a sense of pleasure.
- **Survival:** Basic needs of shelter, survival, food, sexual fulfillment.

The fact that everyone is constantly striving to meet these basic needs is at the heart of reality therapy. When a person feels bad, reality therapists maintain it is because one of the five needs have not been fulfilled. People participating in reality therapy might learn ways to be more aware of any negative thoughts and actions possibly preventing them from meeting their needs, as according to the tenets of reality therapy, changing one's actions may have a positive effect on the way that individual feels and on their ability to attain their desires. These changes ideally

take place through the use of Glasser's choice theory, which uses questions such as "What are you doing/What can you do to achieve your goals?"

Overview of the Therapeutic Process

In reality therapy, the therapist might begin the therapeutic process by guiding a person's attention away from past behaviors in order to focus on those that occur in the present. Present needs are what are relevant, as they are the needs that can be satisfied. Reality therapists also tend to not focus on a person's symptoms, as Glasser believed symptoms of mental distress manifest as a result of a person's disconnection from others.

Individuals who enter reality therapy generally have a specific issue of concern, and the therapist may ask them to consider the effects their behavior has on that area, helping that person focus on things they can actually change rather than things beyond their control. In reality therapy, the focal point is what the person in therapy can control. By understanding one's own needs and desires and developing a plan to meet those needs while refraining from criticizing or blaming others, reality therapists believe that a person may be able to form, reform, or strengthen connections with others.

Role of the Therapist in Reality Therapy

Because reality therapy seeks to treat individuals who experience difficulty in their relationships with others, forming a connection with the therapist is an important beginning in reality therapy. This connection is considered by reality therapists to be the most important dynamic in facilitating healing. Once this relationship is stable, it can be used as a model to form fulfilling connections outside of the therapeutic environment.

Those in therapy can learn how to best strengthen relationships outside of therapy while in the "safe" therapeutic relationship and as a result, be able to more easily expand on those methods in daily life. Reality therapists hold that when a person in therapy can employ the behaviors, actions, and methods developed through therapy in life successfully, they will often be able to improve external relationships and experience a more fulfilling life.

Application of Reality Therapy

Reality therapy is considered an effective therapeutic strategy for addressing many issues, but it can be especially valuable in treating difficulties faced by children and young adults at school and in their communities.

Research has shown improvements in overall classroom functioning, cooperation, and a decrease in challenging behaviors when teachers and school counselors are adequately trained in reality therapy. Studies have also indicated that reality therapy is useful when applied to certain issues with behavioral components, including teen pregnancy. Reality therapy works from the perspective that people must assume responsibility for their behavior if they wish to change it.

Reality therapy has also been effective in the broader community, such as when integrated into athletic coaching and in work with juvenile offenders, to facilitate behavioral change. This form of therapy can help bridge the gap between intolerance and ignorance through education and equality, often resulting in a more unified group.

Concerns and Limitations of Reality Therapy

Findings show that reality therapy has been applied with positive results in schools for problems concerning behavior. However, little long-term research on the effectiveness of this approach in school populations has been conducted. These studies are also limited due to the lack of experimental control in areas such as sample size and training of teachers, as well as questions concerning voluntary participation.

While reality therapy has been found to reduce issues with misbehavior of target groups in schools, findings are limited regarding its capacity for improving the personal experiences of youth, their self-esteem, and self-concept. These findings suggest that reality therapy is effective in addressing symptomatic behavioral issues but not underlying causes and reasons for the behavior.