Types of Therapy

Gestalt Therapy Explained: History, Definition and Examples

21 Aug 2020 by Joshua Schultz, Psy.D. (i) Scientifically reviewed by Jo Nash, Ph.D. (i)

Have you ever heard the terms "closure" or "unfinished business"?



These terms have become part of the cultural lexicon, yet few know that their roots come from gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy is an influential and popular form of therapy that has had an impact on global culture and society. It is an amalgamation of different theories and techniques, compiled and refined over the years by many people, most notably its founder, Fritz Perls.

Although gestalt therapy is often considered a "fringe therapy," it is applicable in diverse settings, from the clinic to the locker room to the boardroom. Read on for an introduction to this exciting therapy.

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Gestalt Therapy Defined

Gestalt therapy is a bulky concept to define. Let's start with a definition by Charles Bowman (1998, p. 106), a gestalt therapy scholar and practitioner. We'll present the full definition and then break down its parts:

Gestalt therapy is a process psychotherapy with the goal of improving one's contact in community and with the environment in general. This goal is accomplished through aware, spontaneous and



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authentic dialogue between client and therapist.

Awareness of differences and similarities [is]

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Let's break it down into three components:

Gestalt therapy is a process psychotherapy with the goal of improving one's contact in community and with the environment in general. A process psychotherapy is one that focuses on process over discrete events. This means that gestalt therapists are more interested in the process as a whole, rather than individual events or experiences.

This goal is accomplished through aware, spontaneous and authentic dialogue between client and therapist. Gestalt psychotherapists use a relational, here-and-now framework, meaning that they prioritize the *current* interactions with the client over *history* and past experience.

And finally: Awareness of differences and similarities [is] encouraged while interruptions to contact are explored in the present therapeutic relationship. Gestalt therapy draws upon dialectical thinking and polarization to help the client achieve balance, equilibrium, contact, and health. We will explore these concepts in greater depth later in this post.

Gestalt therapy borrows heavily from <u>psychoanalysis</u>, Gestalt psychology, existential philosophy, zen Buddhism, Taoism, and more (Bowman, 2005). It is an amalgamation of different theoretical ideas, packaged for delivery to patients using the traditional psychoanalytic therapy situation, and



also includes elements from more fringe elements of psychology, such as psychodrama and role-playing.

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It is tempting to buy into the "great man theory" of gestalt therapy and give all of the credit to Fritz Perls; however, the story is more nuanced than this (Bowman, 2005). Gestalt therapy is the result of many people's contributions. Since this is a brief article, we will focus on three founders: Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman.

Gestalt therapy originated in Germany in the 1930s. Fritz and Laura Perls were psychoanalysts in Frankfurt and Berlin. The Perlses' ideas differed from Freud's so radically that they broke off and formed their own discipline.

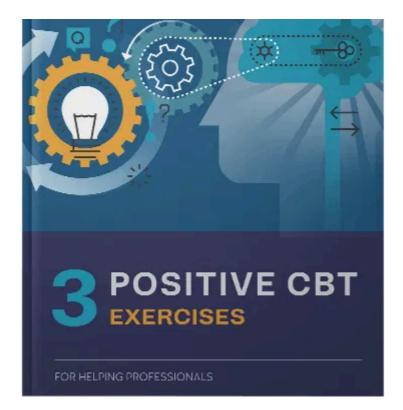
In 1933 they fled Nazi Germany and moved to South Africa, where they formulated much of gestalt therapy. They eventually moved to New York and wrote the book on gestalt therapy with the anarchist writer and gestalt therapist Paul Goodman (Wulf, 1996).

Fritz Perls was a charismatic leader and exciting presenter who spread the teachings of Gestalt therapy widely across America in the 1950s through live demonstrations. He continued to appear on television and in magazines until he died in 1970 (Bowman, 2005). There are still many Gestalt Institutes in operation across the world today, including the original one in New York.





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4 Key Concepts and Principles

'Whole' + Health + Awareness + Responsibility:



1. Gestalt

The German word *gestalt* has no perfect English translation.

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Gestalt therapy is based on gestalt psychology, a discipline of experimental psychology founded in Germany in 1912. Gestalt psychologists argued that human beings perceive entire patterns or configurations, not merely individual components.

This is why when we see a group of dots arranged as a triangle, we see a triangle instead of random dots. Our brains organize information into complete configurations, or gestalts (O'Leary, 2013).

Additionally, the individual is thought of as being involved in a constant construction of gestalts, organizing and reorganizing their experience, searching for patterns and a feeling of wholeness. Gestalt therapy associates feeling whole with feeling alive and connected to one's own unique experience of existence.

Gestalt therapists apply this philosophy of wholeness to their clients. They believe that a human being cannot be understood by generalizing one part of the self to understand the whole person (O'Leary, 2013). For example, the client cannot be understood solely by their diagnosis, or by one interaction, but must be considered the total of all they are.

2. Health



To understand what it means to be healthy in gestalt therapy, we must first understand the ideas of figure and

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There is a black outline of a vase on the screen, and at first, this is all the viewer notices, but after a moment, the viewer's attention shifts and they notice the two faces outlined in the white part of the screen, one on either side of the vase.

In the first perception, the black vase is called the figure, and the white faces are called the ground. But the viewer can shift their attention, and through this act, the figure and ground switch, with the white faces becoming the figure, and the black vase the ground.



Gestalt therapists apply this perceptual phenomenon to human experience. Going through the world, we are

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background. Healthy functioning is the ability to attend flexibly to the figure that is most important at the time (O'Leary, 2013).

Gestalt therapy sees healthy living is a series of creative adjustments (Latner, 1973, p. 54). This means adjusting one's behavior, naturally and flexibly, to the figure in awareness.

Here is another example of this process: As I am writing, I realize that my lips are dry and my mouth is parched. I get up, pour a glass of water, and then return to my writing. In response to my feeling of thirst, I shift my frame of awareness from my writing, to drinking water, and then back to my writing. The act of drinking water, satisfying my thirst, completes the gestalt, and I am free to return to my work.

In contrast, unhealthy living results when one's attention flits from one figure to the other without ever achieving wholeness.

An easy example of this can be seen through our relationships with our phones. If we are working on something important and our phone rings, we can make a decision to ignore it for the moment, finish our work, and then call the person back later. If there is a deadline for our project, this may be the healthy choice. But if we allow our



attention to be divided each time our phone rings, we may never finish our project.

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3. Awareness

Although we cannot help but live in the present, it is clear to anyone living that we can direct our attention away from it. Gestalt therapists prioritize present moment awareness and the notion that paying attention to the events unfolding in the here-and-now is the way to achieve healthy living.

Awareness allows for the figure/ground differentiation process to work naturally, helping us form gestalts, satisfy our needs, and make sense of our experience (Latner, 1973, p. 72). Awareness is both the goal and the methodology of gestalt therapy (O'Leary, 2013).

Therapists use what is present in the here-and-now, including actions, posture, gesticulations, tone of voice, and how the client relates to them, to inform their work (O'Leary, 2013). The past is thought of as significant insofar as it exists in the present (O'Leary, 2013).

Gestalt therapists focus on helping their clients restore their natural awareness of the present moment by focusing on the here-and-now in the therapy room. Experiences and feelings that have not been fully processed in the past are revisited and worked through in the present, such as with the empty chair technique, explored later in this post.



4. Responsibility

In gestalt therapy, there are two ways of thinking about

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and when we "own up to acts, impulses, and feelings." Gestalt therapists help their clients take both kinds of personal responsibility.

When therapy begins, clients do not internalize feelings, emotions, or problems, often externalizing and shifting responsibility for their actions as the fault or consequence of others (O'Leary, 2013). They may be stuck in the past, ruminating on mistakes or regrets about their actions.

When clients are better able to take responsibility for themselves, they come to realize how much they can do for themselves (O'Leary, 2013).

To do this, clients must have an awareness of what is happening to them in the present moment, as well as awareness of their part of the interaction. Increasing this type of awareness, completing past experiences, and encouraging new and flexible behaviors are some of the ways that gestalt therapists help their clients take personal responsibility.

The Empty Chair Technique

Gestalt therapy is focused on wholes and working on the past in the present.



Things that are in



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natural tendency to make gestalts, unfinished business can be a significant drain of energy, as well as a block on future development (O'Leary, 2013).

The most popular and well-known technique in gestalt therapy, the empty chair technique or empty chair dialogue (ECH), is a method of resolving unfinished business in the therapy room.

Unfinished business is often the result of unexpressed emotion, such as not grieving a loss (O'Leary, 2013), and/or unfulfilled needs, such as unaired grievances in a relationship. The client may have chosen to avoid the unfinished business in the moment, deciding not to rock the boat or to preserve the relationship.

After the fact, these unexpressed feelings may lack a suitable outlet or may continue to be avoided because of shame or fear of being vulnerable. Most people tend to avoid these painful feelings instead of doing what is necessary to change (Perls, 1969).

The empty chair technique is a way of bringing unexpressed emotion and unfulfilled needs into the here-and-now. In ECH, the therapist sets up two chairs for the client, one of which is left empty. The client sits in one chair and imagines



the significant other with whom they have unfinished business in the empty chair.

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client switches chairs and speaks to themselves as though they were the significant other. Through this dialogue, the client's past emotions are brought into the present. They are then processed and worked through with the therapist.

This technique can be done with either an ongoing relationship or a relationship that has ended. The resolution of the work is to help the client shift their self-perception. Clients undergoing ECH may shift from viewing themselves as weak and victimized to a place of greater self-empowerment. They may see the significant other with greater understanding or hold them accountable for harm (Paivio & Greenberg, 1995).



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Examples of Gestalt Therapy

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approach is practiced in inpatient clinics and private practices in individual and group therapy. Because of this variety of applications, it can take many forms.

In 1965 the American Psychological Association filmed a series called "*Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*," featuring Fritz Perls (gestalt therapy), Carl Rogers (personcentered therapy), and Albert Ellis (rational emotive behavior therapy), demonstrating their approaches with a patient named Gloria.

To see what gestalt therapy looks like, you can watch this video of Perls working in real time. In the video, Perls describes his approach, works with Gloria for a brief session, and then debriefs the viewer at the end.

Criticisms and Limitations



Much of the criticism in the literature focuses on Fritz Perls, the larger-than-life founder of gestalt therapy. Perls had a

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Perls struggled with interpersonal relationships throughout his life. In turn, the therapy he helped create focused on the ideas of separateness, personal responsibility, and selfsupport as ideal ways of being (Dolliver, 1981).

One criticism of Perls's work of spreading gestalt therapy to lay audiences is that he focused on specific techniques that he could demonstrate on film or in live demonstrations.

These demonstrations elevated Perls to guru status and also encouraged practitioners to apply his techniques piecemeal, without understanding the underlying theory of gestalt therapy. This had the overall effect of watering down the method as a whole (Janov, 2005).

Another critique is that Perls's gestalt therapy focused on helping clients to have "honest interactions" with others. In contrast, he maintained a strict focus on the client's experience, leaving himself out of the room by avoiding personal questions, turning them back on the client (Dolliver, 1981).

Recent gestalt therapists have revised this aspect, bringing more of themselves into the room and answering their clients' questions when there could be therapeutic value in doing so.



Perls also emphasized "total experiencing," yet he deemphasized the client's past and kept the focus of the work

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Gestalt therapy promotes a specific way of living, and therapists need to be mindful of whether encouraging these behaviors and values in their client is actually in their best interest. By adopting an explicit focus on helping clients "become who they truly are," Perls denied his part in shaping what parts of themselves clients felt free to express in the therapy (Dolliver, 1981).

Gestalt therapists have spent a long time living in Perls's shadow. New therapists would be better served by learning the theory and practicing without trying to imitate Perls's style, pushing forward and altering the therapy to make it a better fit for their methods and the needs of their clients.

To practice gestalt therapy effectively and cohesively, rather than as a disconnected set of techniques and quick fixes, it is crucial to have a good understanding of the underlying theory as well as the historical antecedents that it is based on (Bowman, 2005).



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3 Books on the Topic

These three books discuss Gestalt Therapy more in-depth.



1. Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality –

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This book, written in 1951, is the original textbook describing gestalt theory and practice. If you are interested in going to the source before examining a more modern perspective, this is the book for you.

Available on Amazon.

2. The Gestalt Therapy Book - Joel Latner

Written in 1973 by a graduate of the Gestalt Institute in Cleveland, Ohio, this book lays out gestalt theory with natural language and rich examples.

If you are interested in a brief overview of gestalt therapy, as well as a snapshot of the field in the 1970s, this book is a good choice.

Available on Amazon.



3. Buddhist Psychology & Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Psychotherapy for the 21st Century – Eva Gold and Steve Zahm

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approach to gestait therapy and outlines the integrated theory of Buddhist psychology-informed gestalt therapy.

For those interested in the intersection between Buddhism and the gestalt technique, this book will be of particular interest.

Available on Amazon.

A Take-Home Message

Gestalt therapy is an exciting and versatile therapy that has evolved over the years. There is a dynamic history behind this therapy, and it should not be discounted by practitioners, coaches, or therapists who are deciding upon their orientation.

Gestalt psychology also has appeal to laypeople who find the gestalt way of life to be in line with their values.

When learning about gestalt therapy, it is essential to maintain a focus on the underlying theory, moving past the charisma of its founder, Fritz Perls. Perls's work is



instructive and vital to understanding the rise of gestalt therapy.

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your own.

We hope you enjoyed reading this article. For more information, don't forget to <u>download our three Positive</u> CBT Exercises for free.

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Joshua Schultz, Psy.D. is a therapist and consultant based in Philadelphia. He received his doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Widener University, where his dissertation explored compassion in leadership. Joshua is passionate about helping individuals and families cultivate resilience, improve relationships, and achieve meaningful personal and professional growth. He is dedicated to fostering positive change by helping individuals and organizations lead with compassion, while promoting personal growth and resilience.

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What our readers think

SMB on September 21, 2022 at 16:46



Thank you for a hugely informative article. Helped me to draw together the different strands of Gestalt in a

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Eric Novikoff on April 1, 2022 at 23:15

As a student of counseling, I saw Perls' video and was totally turned off to the technique. Then I got a practice client who was emotionally shut down and agonized over the various techniques to use that were in my textbook. I realized the client's mom (the "figure") was in the room with us and decided to try Gestalt despite my misgivings. It was incredibly fruitful, driving me to always be in the present with the client and always examine my own blocks to being totally present in the moment with the client. I veered into what appeared to be other methodologies as necessary such as somatic, mindfulness, even CBT, but found that those methodologies were actually already part of Gestalt as I learned more about it. It's a very flexible and powerful container for addressing a client's needs and keeping the therapist honest with themselves and growing professionally.

I really liked your summary and references, they helped me explain what I'm thinking about Gestalt to others.

<u>Reply</u>

Ogudu Sunday Utor on June 18, 2021 at 22:01

How to answer the question "how are you?" in gestalt Reply



Nicole Celestine, Ph.D. on June 19, 2021 at 09:21 Hi Ogudu,

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present-moment experience, they might be encouraged to respond openly and honestly with reference to how they presently feel in their body, thoughts running through their head, etc. These are just a couple examples $\[Omega]$

Hope that answers your question.

- Nicole | Community Manager

Reply

KELLIE DAVIDSON on March 11, 2021 at 03:06

Great and informative article and the video was very helpful in putting this together.

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