

GESTALT

The therapy that *insists* you be here now

Gestalt can be *fun*. It uses games and role playing to dramatize your problems and liberate your feelings.

by
Deborah
Grandinetti

Ever since the 1960s, when people started “owning” their feelings and beating pillows to express their anger, Gestalt therapy techniques have been essential tools for personal growth. Some of Gestalt’s innovations, like role playing, have become so widespread that you’ll find them in classrooms and boardrooms.

And now, brand-new research at the University of California at Berkeley is demonstrating how Gestalt techniques actually make use of the fundamental processes by which the human brain matures and increases its abilities. Like the brain, each individual has an innate drive to complete the whole—to be whole. (“Gestalt” is the German word for “whole.”)

But the emphasis on wholeness shouldn’t obscure the important fact that, as a therapy, Gestalt can be incredibly effective at helping you recover parts of yourself that have been buried by fear, or discouraged by criticism and failure.

Maybe your dad was a little heavy-handed when you insisted on asserting your will. Maybe mom scoffed at your ambition to be a dancer. And maybe repeated episodes like those have left you estranged from the full range of your creativity or fearful of really asserting yourself. A skilled Gestalt therapist can give you the tools to recover—and integrate—all of those hidden facets of self that are integral to realizing your full potential and feeling really alive.

And Gestalt can be *fun*. It’s a talk therapy, but it uses games and role playing to dramatize your problems and liberate your feelings.

Gestalt is *not* overly concerned with what you’re *thinking*. It demands that you *experience* the *feelings*. That’s what separates it from most talk therapies.

“I use the term ‘getting wet,’” says Alan Cohen, clinical director of the Manhattan-based Gestalt Associates for Psychotherapy. “With cognitive or analytic psychology, you’ll say ‘Yes, well, the water *looks* blue.’ But the only real way to know the swimming pool is to dive in and see how far you can go before the bottom stops you. That’s also how you get to know the self. Letting the parts that have been denied come back into

existence frees up energy that can be used in more productive and satisfying ways.”

Another crucial difference between Gestalt and traditional psychoanalysis is that Gestalt seeks to maximize mental and emotional health, rather than diagnose and treat mental or emotional illness. The focus here is on *growth* and *wholeness*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

‘Faith in the healing power of people’

Fritz Perls, M.D., the German-born creator of this therapy, trained as a classical analyst. As luck would have it, his analyst was Wilhelm Reich, M.D., a star pupil of Freud’s who broke away and contributed much to our understanding of how the muscles of the body tense to stop the flow of intolerable emotions.

Through his work with Dr. Reich, Dr. Perls came to see that the body is very much involved in helping to push painful memories out of our awareness. “Here and now, you may be holding your breath, constricting your diaphragm, or tightening your jaw to inhibit certain feelings,” Cohen explains.

Dr. Perls was also influenced by the European existential movement of the 1930s and ’40s, and the emergence of psychodrama techniques. The therapeutic system he devised is at odds with his classical training in at least three fundamental ways:

- ◆ It focuses on the present, rather than the past. “Fritz felt that life exists in the here and now,” Cohen explains. “You can’t be alive *then*, you can’t be alive *someplace else*. You have to be alive here and now.” Even our *memories* are experienced *in the present*.
- ◆ It believes you can heal your past and take care of your unfinished business by simply tuning in to what you’re experiencing now. That unfinished business of the past—the anger, the disappointment, the dreams, the shame—is *alive* in the present, says Cohen. And you are actively repressing it and defending against it. “It’s like

pushing a beach ball in the water. The ball keeps trying to come up. This active process is what we see in Gestalt therapy."

◆ It trusts the experience of the client, rather than making the therapist the expert. "The psychoanalytic world saw a person's needs and impulses as something to be mistrusted, whereas Fritz had a healthy faith in the healing process of people," Cohen says. "He saw even pathological symptoms as an attempt to work toward health. And he placed his trust in the body because it is very direct. If the body is mobilizing to express anger, the anger is there."

A TYPICAL SESSION

'Releasing the captive part of yourself'

There's no such thing as a typical Gestalt therapy session. The process is always spontaneous, a creation in the moment. The character of the session depends upon the therapist's assessment of what degree of confrontation you can handle: gentle, outright, or subtle frustration of your habitual way of doing something.

Throughout, the therapist will keep bringing your focus back to your present experience: your feelings and body sensations. You may be asked to describe what is going on in your body, or to 'give a voice' to a particularly tense area of your body. Or a chair may be set aside for you to project a disowned part of yourself into that chair. You and this imagined part of you will then be invited to talk and negotiate for the release of that captive part of the self.

Wherever the session takes you, the following principles will be guiding it. First, you'll learn to heighten your awareness of the ways in which you avoid parts of yourself. That, in turn, may bring up feelings you are not consciously aware of. With those feelings may come an awareness of needs you've long denied yourself. Once you become aware of those needs, you learn to satisfy them, through both your own resources and the support of others.

"In Gestalt, we see this as bringing a genuine part of the self into the world and allowing it to find satisfaction," says Cohen. "In the repeated bringing of that self into the world in more and more satisfying ways, a person begins to diminish the need for the defense."

Once the defense against painful memories or disappointments is dropped, the freed energy may result in sounds that sound clearer or a world that seems brighter, more colorful, and alive, adds Cohen.

Often, the initial experience of having a long-denied need satisfied can be disorienting, says

Cohen. This disorientation leads to reorganization—and a feeling of "coming alive, a sense of coming into the world again."

The same principles apply whether you participate in a one-on-one group session or take part in a Gestalt therapy group. In private sessions, you don't have to share your therapy time with others. But group work offers advantages, too. You may identify so much with the work another is doing that some healing takes place just by watching them work. The group also offers you many more partners who can role-play with you and lead you to a greater understanding of yourself. Cohen says he first experienced Gestalt work in a group because it was less expensive that way.

The trend in Gestalt therapy is toward combining individual and group sessions. Cohen advises people who have never had therapy to do individual work first so they have a greater sense of themselves before they work with a group.

INSIDE MY SESSION

'If your legs could speak, what would they say?'

I had a rather unusual opportunity come up when I was researching this article—the chance to have my very first Gestalt therapy session taped for a PBS special called "The World of Abnormal Psychology." I decided to take the risk.

Well, the session went great. You'll get a chance to see it when the show airs, sometime after January 1992, according to Marsha Zeesman of Alvin H. Perlmutter Inc., the independent film studio that is producing the show.

Here are some excerpts from my session. I'll show you exactly how it began, skip to the highlights, and then share with you the impact it had a few days later.

GESTALT THERAPY

MORE THAN A THERAPY, A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.

The basic guidelines of Gestalt therapy have the distinct ring of a philosophy to them. They are much more than just a set of directions. Instead, they point to a whole way of being—a way that teaches you to be responsible for yourself, while treasuring the present moment. This message has served as the foundation for many of the biggest best-sellers in the personal growth field. The Gestalt tenets may indeed have had a profound effect on the nature of the self-help movement that we know today.

See for yourself. Here are several of the key guidelines of Gestalt therapy.

1. Live now. Be concerned with the present, not the past or the future.
2. Live here. Deal with what is present, not absent.
3. Stop imagining. Experience what is real.
4. Stop unnecessary thinking. Rather, taste, see, feel.
5. Express rather than manipulate, explain, justify, or judge.
6. Give in to unpleasantness and pain. Do not restrict your awareness.
7. Accept no "should" or "ought to" other than your own.
8. Take full responsibility for your actions, feelings, and thoughts.
9. Surrender to being as you are.

—D.E.

(cont. on page 13)

DRAMATIZING YOUR LIFE

A Sample of Gestalt's Unique Techniques

Many of the techniques of Gestalt therapy have aspects of game-playing and theater about them. But rather than having recreation as their goal, these processes are designed to achieve such therapeutic goals as getting you in touch with your feelings in the present moment and uncovering and integrating parts of yourself that you have hidden.

Here are a few of these interesting techniques:

1. Exaggeration. This technique is designed to assist you in really feeling your feelings. Let's say that you mention to your therapist that you are feeling angry. He may start by asking you to say, "I'm angry." Then he may ask you to exaggerate by saying, "I'm so angry I could blow up this building." Then, he might ask you to scream your message about being angry. Or stand on the top of the chair and yell about your anger as loud as you can. All along the therapist would be asking you how you are feeling and what new awarenesses you are experiencing in the present moment. For example, as you are standing on the chair screaming, you may suddenly have complete awareness of being angry at your third grade teacher who made you stand in the corner for talking during class. The therapist would then explore this experience with you, to assist you to integrate this disowned part—perhaps childhood anger, shame, and sadness—into the whole of your being.

2. Reversals. This game very much resembles theater. In it, you are asked to act like someone who would have the "opposite" character traits that you express. For example, someone who is an inhibited person would be asked to play an exhibitionist. Or someone who is the "motherly" type who always cares for people would be asked to assume the role of a person who's more reserved, distant, and less emotionally available. The therapist would then

assist the person to explore this "unusual" role and *what it feels like*. A game like "reversals" can assist you in gaining access to aspects of yourself that are usually hidden or "disowned."

3. Owning the projection. This is one of the most provocative of all the Gestalt games. At its base is the idea that your outer experience is a reflection of your inner reality. Specifically, it says that behaviors in other people that you judge and find upsetting are the very expressions that you can explore inside yourself for maximum benefit.

For example, in a group therapy setting, you may comment that you feel that another specific member of the group is keeping something from the group. You may say that from the very beginning you have felt that this person has a secret that he is ashamed to admit. You might say that it upsets and angers you that the person doesn't trust the group enough to share.

In a Gestalt therapy group, you would be encouraged to use your feelings about your fellow group member as a platform for reclaiming and integrating disowned aspects of yourself. Are your upset and anger at someone else's behavior actually clues that these behaviors are occurring in more subtle ways inside yourself.

For instance, the therapist will work with you to "own the projections" you have placed on your fellow group member. The therapist will inquire if there is something you have been keeping from the group. You will be asked if there is some secret you are ashamed to admit. You will be asked if you don't trust the group enough to share, and if this makes you upset and angry at yourself.

Using the Gestalt technique "Owning the Projection" is a unique way to develop greater awareness of the dynamic relationship between outer experience and inner reality.

—D.E.

•
"Is there
some secret
that you
are
ashamed
to admit?"
•

(cont. from page 11)

Alan: "Let's just start with what you're aware of right now."

Deborah: "Right now, I'm aware that my thighs are really tight and I can feel the air pushing against my belly. I feel my aliveness right in through here," I say, gesturing toward my chest.

Alan: "Tightness and aliveness . . . What is the aliveness?"

Deborah: "To me, that's movement."

Alan: "Do you feel movement?" [I nod.] "Where and how?"

Deborah: "I feel movement in my belly as the air tries to push up. It feels a little like a roller coaster. I can almost feel the wind against my face."

Alan: "A roller coaster . . . Let's see what that roller coaster is like. Let's see what happens when you let your belly rise and fall."

Deborah: "The roller coaster dips. It speeds forward."

Alan: "Can you make an 'I' statement? Can you say 'I'm speeding forward.'"

Deborah: "I'm speeding forward."

Alan: "And . . . ?"

Deborah: "And, oh God that's scary!" [I laugh, a little nervously. He's right there with me, laughing too.] "But it feels good."

Alan: "What are you aware of in your legs?"

Deborah: "It feels like they're clutching the ground."

Alan: "If you could let your legs speak, but instead of saying 'they,' say 'I feel,' what would your legs say?"

Deborah: "I'm not too sure about this. Wait a minute. Not one more inch. Let's see where we're going first."

Alan: "And what about your upper body?"

Deborah: "There's some comfort right in the center, but it's not all clear. I feel some clouds or darkness around it."

Alan: "Let that part speak."

Deborah: [my voice becomes very soft here] "I love the way it feels to move forward. Let's go. I want to expand. Trust me and move forward."

Alan: "So that's what this part over here is saying. What are the legs saying?"

Deborah: "I'm not so sure.."

Alan: "So now we have a bit of a dialogue going. Let's assign a chair to each part."

Now I let these two facets of me interact. And that brings me to a memory of making music with pots and pans as a very little girl and feeling hurt because my mother was too harried cooking dinner to give me the attention and approval I wanted. I feel the sadness of that, come to understand why I hold back from crying and or asserting myself and begin to see what I do need.

Alan: "Speak to me more from this little girl. What else does she have to offer?"

Deborah: [in a soft voice] "Dreams." [in a louder and brighter voice] "Noise. Lots of noise."

Alan: "Lots of noise! You get colorful when you say noise."

Deborah: "Noise. The little girl loves to bang on pots lids and spoons and bring them together in new and interesting ways. She wants to dance through the living room."

Alan: "Can you say 'I want to?'"

Deborah: "I want to make noise! I want to be silly."

Alan: "Boy do you look like you just loosened up a lot. Well, make some noise!"

Deborah: [timidly] "Can I?"

Alan: "There's mom again. S-s-s-sh-sh.."

With this I let loose with a "la-la-la" that fills the room. What fun. Then we explore my family's reaction to that noise and my desire to not be good all the time. We stay with the process until I can make noise from my toes upward, without tensing my legs. Alan's prescription as we close the session is to go home and have as many noisy tantrums as I want in the privacy of my home. I do and the homework pays off.

A few days later, when I show up at my dentist's office a few minutes late, I encounter the dental hygienist from hell. "You're late," she says the minute she sees me.

"I know," I say. "I'm six minutes late." Twice during the cleaning, I announce that I'm uncomfortable and would like to rinse my mouth. This doesn't go over well with her. And then when she goes at it with the dental floss as if she were using a hacksaw, I ask her very firmly if she could be more gentle. She hates this. I'm having great fun not being the good little patient. I think I'm going to like saying "No. Stop. I don't like this." ●

GESTALT THERAPY

WHAT IS IT? Gestalt therapy uses role playing and other games designed to help you give a voice to your hidden strengths and inner fears. The focus is on emotions. The entire therapy is designed to help you experience thoughts and feelings you've been repressing. A Gestalt therapist may also work with you on resolving inner conflicts through a dialogue between the competing parts of yourself. The work requires a willingness to focus on the sensations in your body, and to give a voice to those tensions.

WHO IS IT BEST FOR? Gestalt therapy is for anyone who wants to uncover and develop unused talents, become more centered in the here and now, and experience a heightened sense of aliveness. Experts say it can help bring balance to your life by integrating the different parts of your personality. The goal: to become a whole person.

WHAT'S THE COST? The cost varies depending upon the geographic area and the type of session. A one-hour private session in New York could cost as much as \$75 to \$100, but it could be less depending on location. There are also ongoing Gestalt therapy groups and single-session workshop groups given at various self-growth centers around the country, which are usually less expensive.

HOW OFTEN? You may see pleasing results in a single session. Long-term personality change may require a year or two of therapy.

WHERE CAN YOU GO? There are Gestalt Institutes in most major population areas of the country. If you'd like a referral to someone in the New York area, or information about Gestalt Institutes nationwide, contact Alan Cohen, Gestalt Associates for Psychotherapy, 201 E. 34th St., New York, NY 10016, or call (212) 689-7740. You can also contact the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Westchester at (914) 472-9878.