

Gestalt Therapy and Ordinary People

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Gestalt Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that focuses expanding clients awareness of the present moment. This form of therapy developed in the 1940s/1950 by psychiatrist Fritz Perls and psychotherapist, Laura Perls. Gestalt Therapy was formed as an alternative to psychoanalysis. In Gestalt therapy, expanding a client's awareness of the present moment is thought to be curative. By doing this, clients can achieve wholeness. This approach emphasizes that clients must become aware of their denied parts and work towards owning their experience. This form of therapy also focuses on the belief that people are whole entities that consist of emotions, body and mind. A person's complete self must be discovered, explored and confronted. As a person gains awareness of parts of themselves, they can take more responsibility for their lives and and develop a better sense of what they can do for themselves and others. Similarly to existential therapy and person-centered therapy, this approach is considered to be one the primary forms of humanistic therapy. This phenomenological and existential approach not only focuses the "here" and "now" but on the "what" and "how" of experiencing. The Gestalt approach encourages role-playing and reenactment. Some therapist might use artistic exercises such as drawing and painting. This allows the clients to become more aware of their thoughts and actions. By becoming aware of their actions, clients can can gain insight on how negative thinking patterns and behavior might be blocking their self-awareness. Negative emotions such as anger, pain, anxiety and resentment have to actively be expressed in the present. Unresolved negative feelings are thought to affect the physical and mental health of a client. A Gestalt therapist must exhibit authenticity, empathy and great listening skills. They must be able to redirect a client to present feelings, when they begin to dwell in the past or become fixated on the future. Gestalt therapists believe that for many people the power of the present is lost due to these issues. Gestalt therapist focus on "blocked energy", which is a form of

defense mechanism that can result in unfinished business. Clients are encouraged to become aware of how this blockage is being expressed in their bodies and transform this “energy” into more adaptive behaviors. One of the techniques used in Gestalt therapy is “the empty chair” and “exaggeration” technique. The empty chair technique is a form of role-playing in which the therapist encourages dialogue between a person they are imagining or a part of themselves in an empty chair and the client in order to engage in their thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Exaggeration technique helps the client become more aware of emotions attached to behavior by repeating/exaggerating a particular movement or expression.

In the film, *Ordinary People*, Conrad struggles with understanding himself. In his therapy sessions with Dr. Berger, we can see that Conrad lacks self-awareness. Conrad also exhibits suppressed feelings and lives his life in the past. I believe that Conrad would benefit from Gestalt therapy. Gestalt therapy can help Conrad discover feelings that have been repressed regarding his brother and family. Similarly to Existential Therapy, the gestalt approach helps clients gain awareness of the present moment. Conrad feels as if he has no control over his life, this form of therapy would allow him to feel as if he does. This approach is utilized in the film, as Dr. Berger uses role-play in order to help Conrad share his feelings regarding the death of his brother. The empty chair technique can be used to uncover Conrad’s deep rooted emotional issues and his relationship with himself and his family. By utilizing the empty chair technique it can help Conrad develop a better sense of emotional integration in dealing with the feelings of loss. Gestalt therapy views grief as a part of life and necessary for development. Confronting these feelings will allow Conrad to process them and move forward without this emotional blockage. This approach can also help Conrad regarding depression because of its focus on self-awareness. It can help Conrad become aware of what situations trigger Conrad’s

depression. Gestalt therapy can be beneficial to Conrads emotions, body, mind and spirit. Not only will this approach help him gain more self-awareness and improve his self-confidence, but it will also allow him to make peace with himself/ his past and take responsibility for his choices.

References:

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