

“Ordinary People”

Gestalt Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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Conrad Jarret is a junior high school student who recently attempted suicide. Subsequently, Conrad's parents had him admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where he stayed for four months. While there, he received electric shock treatment, individual counseling, and group counseling. Upon his release, the therapist at the hospital encouraged Conrad to follow up with me for counseling. This was reinforced by his father, who told Conrad to contact my office in hopes that coming to see me may be of benefit to Conrad.

During my first session with Conrad, he stated that he wanted to control his life more, mainly to prevent everyone from worrying about him. Conrad appears trapped in the past by guilt over his brother's death and his fractured relationship with his mother. He has become socially withdrawn and wants to develop a better relationship with his mother but does not know how to respond to his mother's apparent emotional detachment from him. To help Conrad gain control over his life and address these underlying issues, I will be applying Gestalt therapy and techniques to our counseling sessions.

Gestalt therapy was founded by Frederick Perls and can be described as a holistic and integrative approach to therapy. It emphasizes the totality of the mind, emotions, and behavior rather than conceptualizing them as separate components. Its application is in the here and now to help clients resolve unfinished business in the present. Central to Gestalt therapy is also the ideology that within us is the inherent capacity to progress toward self-actualization or self-regulation (Corey, 2015). It is also consistent with existentialist theory—that there is no static identity, we are constantly learning new information about ourselves as we experience different challenges—our phenomenology is reshaping and reconstructing. Since Gestalt therapy promotes

increased awareness and self-direction, Conrad can foster new perspectives and implement positive changes in his life as he gains a better understanding and clarity of his thoughts, emotions, and behavior (Corey, 2015).

Gestalt therapy is a flexible and open approach to therapy. It does not ascribe to any specific technique. Instead, therapists can use various techniques or develop creative experiments to assist clients in increasing awareness and striving toward choosing their own direction in life. Two techniques—the empty-chair technique and the dream work technique—will be applied to the counseling sessions to help Conrad increase awareness.

I will use these techniques because Conrad's guilt may result from the juxtaposition of anger and love for his brother. He was angry because Buck was treated like the golden child by his mother, who displayed no hesitancy in her affection toward him, while she appeared to be cold and detached from Conrad, who struggled to get her attention. Conrad may have suppressed his anger toward his brother. There is no doubt that Conrad loved his brother but may have also been very jealous of him and may have subconsciously desired that Buck was not around so that he could be the object of their mother's affection. Now with the death of Buck, Conrad is experiencing guilt. The anger he felt toward his brother he has now projected onto himself. The suicide act may be seen as Conrad's attempt to punish himself. However, the only way to bring this to the surface is to have Conrad participate in the Empty-Chair technique, where he can engage in a dialogue with himself, explore these feelings and bring them to conscious awareness where they can be put in perspective. This exercise will consist of two chairs, and Conrad will sit in one chair and then shift to the other repeatedly. This technique will prevent him from further dissociating from his anger, create a higher level of integration with the internal conflicts he has been experiencing, and will also bring him greater awareness (Corey, 2015).

Conrad has been having dreams about the boating accident and will be asked to describe his dream in the present tense as if his dreams were happening now so that we can identify the existential message in his dreams. His dreams represent unfinished struggles that need to be resolved. Conrad will evaluate the various elements of his dreams as parts of his persona. He will be asked to talk to the different characters in his dream. As he tells the dream, I will observe and ask him what he feels in the here and now. Finally, Conrad will interpret his dream and recognize the underlying desires, wishes, or concerns that he is conflicted with.

Moreover, he will be able to get in touch with any feelings that he has been denying. For Conrad to gain the control he seeks for his life, he must become his authentic self. To accomplish this, he must confront and overcome the unfinished business in his life and develop greater awareness. Then he will be able to choose his direction in life freely.

Reference

- Corey, G. (2015). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy, Enhanced*
10th Edition. Cengage Learning
- Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Production.