

Ordinary People Paper: Gestalt Therapy

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Gestalt therapy is categorized as a phenomenological, existential, and process-based approach founded on the premise that individuals must be understood in the context of their ongoing relationship with the environment (Corey, 2016, p. 199). In terms of the approach being phenomenological, it focuses on the client's perception of reality. In terms of existential, it is founded on the notion that people are always in the process of becoming, remaking, and rediscovering themselves (Corey, 2016, p. 199). In addition, as an existential approach, Gestalt therapy gives special attention to existence as individuals experience it and affirm the human capacity for growth and healing through interpersonal contact and insight (Corey, 2016). A basic assumption of Gestalt therapy is that individuals have the capacity to self-regulate when they are aware of what is happening in and around them. Therapy provides the setting and opportunity for that awareness to be supported and restored. The therapist is attentive to the client's present experience and trusts in the process, thereby assisting the client in moving toward increased awareness, contact, and integration. Awareness, choice, and responsibility are cornerstones of the practice (Corey, 2016, p. 200-201).

Gestalt therapy does not ascribe to a "goal-oriented" methodology. (Corey, 2016, p. 206). However, therapists do define basic goals. Including assisting the client to attain greater awareness, which coincides with greater choice. Awareness is defined by knowing the environment, knowing oneself, accepting oneself, and being able to make contact. Increasing and enhancing awareness, by itself, is seen as curative. Clients void of awareness, do not possess the tools for personality change. The awareness provides clients the capacity to face, accept, and integrate denied parts as well as to fully experience their subjectivity. By becoming aware of

these denied parts and working toward owning their experience, clients can become integrated (Corey, 2016).

Corey (2016) illustrates a three-stage integration sequence that specifies a client's growth in therapy. The initial stage of this sequence consists of discovery. During this stage, clients are likely to reach a new realization about themselves, acquire a novel view of an old situation, or may take a new look at some significant person in their lives. In doing so, these discoveries often come as a surprise to them.

The second stage of the integration sequence is accommodation. In this stage, the client becomes aware that they have a choice (Corey, 2016, p. 209). This new awareness allows the client to try out new behaviors in the supportive environment of the therapeutic setting. In doing so, the client then is able to expand their awareness of the world. This allows clients to acquire coping skills with difficult situations. In addition, clients are likely to participate in out-of-office experiments, which can be discussed in the following therapy session.

The third stage of the integration sequence is assimilation. This assimilation involves clients educating themselves on how to influence their environment. (Corey, 2016, p. 209) During this stage, clients feel competent in handling the surprises they encounter in their daily lives. The client's behavior at this stage may include taking a stand on a critical issue. Clients in due course, develop confidence in their ability to improve and improvise. Improvisation is the confidence that comes from knowledge and skills. The clients are able to make choices that will result in getting what they want. The therapist is able to highlight that something has been accomplished. Moreover, acknowledging the changes that have taken place within the client (Corey, 2016).

Gestalt practice involves a person-to-person relationship between therapist and client. The therapist is responsible for the quality of their presence, for knowing themselves and the client, and for remaining open to the client (Corey, 2016). In addition, the therapist is responsible for establishing and maintaining a therapeutic environment that will encourage work on the client's part. As a therapist, it is important to allow themselves to be affected by their clients and that they actively share their own present perceptions and experiences as they encounter clients in the here and now (Corey, 2016).

According to the website (How Gestalt Therapy Works, n.d.), the application of the "empty chair" technique can be implemented in therapy. When utilizing this role-play exercise as a technique, the client is allowed to imagine and participate in a conversation with another person or another part of themselves. This is put into practice by sitting across from an empty chair. In doing so, the client engages in dialogue as if they were speaking with that other person or that other part of themselves. The empty chair exercise can be useful in drawing out important feelings, meanings, and other details that can help clients become more aware of their emotional experiences and how to begin the healing process (How Gestalt Therapy Works, n.d.).

A second technique that can be implemented in therapy is the observation of body language. During a session, the therapist will observe the client's body language and movement such as tapping their foot, wringing their hands, or making a certain facial expression. After the observation of this body movement, the therapist is likely to comment on their observation of this and inquire about what is happening for the person at that moment. In addition to this, the therapist may incorporate language and ask the client to label their foot, hands, or facial expression with a voice to speak from that place (How Gestalt Therapy Works, n.d.).

Gestalt Therapy can provide several potential benefits such as improving an individual's sense of self-control, mindfulness, and communication skills (How Gestalt Therapy Works, n.d.). In addition, Gestalt therapy can increase a person's emotional understanding and regulate their mental state and emotional dysregulation.

Research from the website (How Gestalt Therapy Works, n.d.) proposes that gestalt therapy can be effective in treating a range of conditions including anxiety and personality disorders. Anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive fear of or apprehension about real or perceived threats, that lead to altered behavior and often physical symptoms such as increased heart rate or muscle tension. In reference to personality disorders, they are characterized by pervasive, enduring patterns of thinking, perceiving, reacting, and relating that cause significant distress or functional impairment.

As I examined the main character Conrad in the film *Ordinary People*, he appeared to be a high school kid that continued to display ongoing symptoms of anxiety, low- self-esteem, worry, agitation, and disturbance when around people. These symptoms were highlighted in his hostility, inattention, aggression, and self-harming practices throughout the film. The film was able to capture these symptoms and behaviors in several instances toward his mother, swim teammates, father, and psychiatrist. During the session, I would implement the technique of observing his body language. Doing so will allow me to provide feedback pertaining to his physical behavior as well as inquire about his view on his behavior.

During a session, Conrad also expressed having memories in the form of dreams that were unpleasant in multiple sessions. He continued to express how his memories of his brother's death caused his distress and intrusive thoughts. In addition, Conrad verbalizes how his brother was

“screwing around in the thunderstorm” (Redford, 1980, 1:38:59). As his psychiatrist, this would prompt me to engage in using the technique of “empty chair” with Conrad. This would allow Conrad to express his feelings of anger, loneliness, frustration, and disappointment for the event that took place. Additionally, in the film, Conrad meets with his psychiatrist and discusses his ongoing feud with his mother. During the session, Dr. Burger encourages Conrad to “forgive your mom and yourself” (Redford, 1980, 1:09:24). As a counselor applying the “double empty chair” technique would also be important. For the reason that Conrad can begin to have open dialogue with his mother and himself, as he begins to work at reestablishing a healthy relationship with his mother.

Reference

1. How Gestalt therapy Works. (n.d.) *How Gestalt Therapy Works*. Very well Mind.
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2. Corey, G. (2016). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*. 10th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning US.
3. Redford, R. (1980). *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprise.