Goals of Gestalt Therapy

Today, many counselors are using the techniques developed by Gestalt therapists. The author explains the theory behind Gestalt therapy and discusses it in terms of its goals: awareness, maturation, integration, authenticity, behavior change, and self-regulation.

Much interest has been focused on Gestalt therapy in recent years. Training institutes are functioning in Cleveland, Atlanta, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Amherst, Massachusetts. Several programs about Gestalt therapy were presented at the 1972 APA Convention. Recent books by Perls (1969a) and Fagan and Shepherd (1970) have helped to make available the theory and techniques of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy is a system rich in techniques. It seems that many therapists and counselors are using Gestalt techniques without much understanding of the theory, goals, or aims of Gestalt therapy. The techniques themselves may elicit intense emotional responses from clients. These responses may be potentially harmful to the client if the therapist lacks a clear understanding of the theory and goals of Gestalt therapy. The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to briefly present the theoretical foundations of Gestalt therapy and, second, to present and discuss the goals of Gestalt therapy.

Theory of Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy is a type of psychotherapy first developed and practiced by Frederick S. Perls. Perls wrote the manuscript for his first book during the Second World War. It was published in the United States under the title Ego, Hunger, and Aggression in 1947. Many of Perls' basic ideas about Gestalt therapy and the nature of man can be found in this first book. However, at that time he referred to his approach as concentration therapy. The term Gestalt therapy was first used in print when Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) published a book entitled Gestalt Therapy: The Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. One of the reasons Perls selected the name Gestalt therapy was because of his admiration for the work of Gestalt psychologists like Kurt Goldstein, Kurt Lewin, and Max Wertheimer and their belief in the wholeness of man (Perls, 1969b).
Much of the formulation of Gestalt therapy is based in part on Goldstein's (1939) organismic theory of personality. This theory espouses the belief that normal, healthy man reacts as a whole organism, not as a disorganized, disoriented organism. This approach emphasizes the unity and integration of the "normal" personality. Any fragmentation of man is objected to. Some systems of therapy tend to deal only with the cognitive aspects of man and ignore the sensory and emotional modes of experiencing. In keeping with the organismic and existential foundation, the statement by Straus (1963) "Man thinks, not the brain" appropriately reflects the Gestalt therapy point of view.

Of special importance is the tendency of the organism to form figures and grounds. A figure is any process that emerges (becomes foreground) and stands out against a background. Put another way, figure is what the organism is paying attention to. Hall and Lindzey (1970) pointed out that, in terms of perception, figure is what occupies the center of attentive awareness. In the normal person there is a continuous flow of figures emerging from the background, fading away, or being destroyed, and something else emerging as foreground (Wallen, 1970). In other words, as new needs arise, new figures are formed. If the need is satisfied the gestalt is destroyed, permitting the formation of new gestalts.

The destruction of gestalts is one of the most important concepts in Gestalt therapy. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) referred to this process as a kind of aggressive destructiveness and reconstructiveness. Before we can assimilate anything, some degree of destruction (destructuring) is necessary. This process should not be confused with annihilation, where the object is to wipe out something completely. Instead, in the process of gestalt destruction, the organism mounts enough aggression to close the gestalt.

This process of destroying gestalts is necessary for the healthy survival of the organism. This destruction permits the organism to absorb selectively according to its own needs. Without this process the organism is unable to pick and choose; assimilation is impossible. Interference with the formation and the destruction of gestalts may have two possible results: (a) introjection (swallowing whole) of something whether it meets the needs of the organism or not; (b) a compulsive hanging-on to the unfinished situation which results in other needs going unmet.

Aggression, when used in the content of Gestalt therapy, does not mean hostility or an unprovoked attack. Instead, aggression is viewed as a natural biological function of the organism (Perls, 1947). Perls et al. (1951) stated that aggression includes everything that an organism does to initiate contact with its environment. This kind of aggression is necessary to the health of the organism.

If a person is unable to express his aggressive impulses appropriately, that is, in making contact with the environment, it is safe to assume that they will be misused. There is no denying that aggression may be pathologically misused against objects and other persons and that it may be used against the self, as in a retroflection (Perls et al., 1951). Healthy aggression is the moving toward objects that are necessary for need satisfaction; put another way, aggression is the initiative that is needed to close gestalts or destroy figures as they form.
Robert L. Harman received his EdD in counseling psychology from the University of Nebraska. He is the Associate Director of the Counseling and Testing Center at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Harman has been a student of Gestalt therapy for several years. His recent research has been in assessing client satisfaction and in vocational identity.

Without this kind of aggression the person is stuck and unable to fulfill his needs.

The remainder of this article will discuss the goals of Gestalt therapy. More specifically, certain conditions are necessary for man to function as described in the first part of this article. The goals themselves are worked-for states which permit a person to function as a total organism, to form figures and grounds, to destroy gestalts, and to use his aggression appropriately.

**Goals of Gestalt Therapy**

The goals of Gestalt therapy can be discussed in general and in specific ways. In general terms, Simkin (see Footnote 1) stated it appropriately: "My primary therapeutic task, as I see it, is to help the person I am working with accept himself." Most Gestalt therapists are in agreement with Beisser's (1970) paradoxical theory of change; that is, change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. So a general goal is for the client to accept himself fully as he exists right now.

Another general goal in Gestalt therapy is to help people regain or reown their potential. It is believed that many people seeking therapy have disowned or given away their own power for coping with and solving their problems. It is the goal of the Gestalt therapist to get people to do for themselves what they are capable of doing.

In specific terms, the Gestalt therapist has several goals or aims that he works toward in the therapeutic relationship.

The specific goals to be discussed here are awareness, integration, maturation, responsibility, authenticity, self-regulation, and behavior change.

**Awareness**

Perls (1969a) believed that everything is grounded in awareness and that it is the only basis for knowledge and communication. Awareness is a state of consciousness that develops spontaneously when the organism attends to whatever becomes foreground. Awareness means being in touch with, being aware of, what one is doing, planning, and feeling. Clients are taught to be aware of how they prevent themselves from achieving certain goals they have deemed important, or of how they prevent themselves from changing behaviors they wish to change.

Naranjo (1971) stated, "The immediate aim of Gestalt therapy is the restoration of awareness [p. 136]." The task of the therapist is to help the client recognize how he blocks his awareness so that he can function with all his abilities. Enright (1970) pointed out that the therapist helps the client permit his
awareness to develop, thereby reestablishing the conditions under which the patient can solve his own problems. Gestalt therapists are interested in helping people become aware of "how" and "what" they are doing. When clients become aware of what they are doing in the "here and now," they are then able to make meaningful decisions and take action.

Perls (1969a) stated that awareness, by and of itself, can be curative. Sometimes it is necessary for the therapist to direct awareness by such questions as, "What's happening now?" "What are you in touch with now?" "What are you experiencing now?" These kinds of questions help to keep people in the "here and now." In order to grow, the client must be more and more aware of the self and aware of the world, instead of only in touch with fantasies, prejudices, and apprehensions. The therapist may need to direct the person's awareness to how and what he avoids in his life.

Integration

In Gestalt therapy integration has to do with the bringing together of opposites. This is helpful in that energy previously expended by two disparate parts of the person competing with each other can be brought together in a productive way. In other words, when there is competition between parts of a person, energy is drained off or neutralized. Through the integration of these parts the energy that would be lost is saved and is available for other things. Perls (1969a) felt that when opposing forces are integrated, they can join in productive combination and interplay. Also, when opposite, disparate parts are integrated, a gestalt is closed, enabling the person to move and deal with new gestalts as they are formed.

A typical example is the client who relates to the therapist that he wants to be able to express warmth and affection toward others, but a part of him prevents him from doing this. The therapist may work toward the integration of these parts by asking the client to fully identify with both parts, perhaps by developing a dialogue between the parts. Thus, the goal is integration, not the elimination of one part. Many clients are in conflict over what they "should" and "should not" do or be. This is the typical topdog–underdog dichotomy in Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969a). The work of the therapist here is to help the client integrate his "shoulds" and "wants" so that he is able to function as a single, unified organism. It is important to remember that there is no such thing as total and permanent integration. Perls (1969a) emphasized that integration is an ongoing process.

Maturation

For the Gestalt therapist, helping people in the process of maturing is an important goal. This goal is stated very succinctly in the following quote.

We have a very specific aim in Gestalt Therapy, and this is the same aim that exists at least verbally in other forms of therapy, in other forms of discovering life. The aim is to mature, to grow up [Perls, 1969a, p. 26].

In Gestalt therapy, maturing is the transcendence from environmental support to self-support (Perls, 1969a). The therapist will attempt to help the client learn how he prevents himself from maturing. What does he do to keep from maturing? The aim here is to get the
client to furnish his own support and not depend on others to do what he is capable of doing for himself.

It is especially important for the therapist to avoid doing for the client what he is capable of doing for himself. If the therapist falls into this trap, he is helping the client to avoid standing on his own feet. Anytime the therapist does for the client what he is capable of doing for himself, he helps the client avoid maturing, avoid taking responsibility for his own life.

Perls (1970) felt a person does not mature because he does not want to take on the responsibility of the adult person. To grow up means to be alone and to be on one's own. This is a prerequisite for maturity.

Responsibility

It has been pointed out by Naranjo (1970) that responsibility is not a must but an unavoidable fact: We are the responsible doers for whatever we do. If a client wants to play the blame game and place the source of his problems on others, the goal of the therapist is to help the client become aware of and accept the responsibility for making himself feel bad by playing the blame game. The Gestalt therapist believes that when a person is aware of what and how he is doing something and accepts the responsibility for it, it is then possible for that person to decide if he wants to change his behavior.

By accepting responsibility for their actions, people can become the creators of their own destinies. According to Perls et al. (1951), the aim is for the client to come to realize that he is creative in his environment and responsible for his environment—not to blame—but responsible in the sense that it is he who lets it stand or changes it.

Perls (1969a, 1969b) discussed responsibility as response-ability, that is, the ability to respond. The ability to respond, to have thoughts, reactions, emotions, is taking the responsibility to be what one is. Perls went on to say that this responsibility is grounded in the word "I." Responsibility means simply the willingness to say “I am I.”

A favorite technique used by Gestalt therapists to encourage clients to accept responsibility for themselves is to discourage questions. Almost all questions have an implied statement or hidden agenda behind them. Very infrequently are they the uncomplicated request for information they appear to be. When a client is willing to take the risk of saying where he is and “owning” the statement behind the question, he has taken the responsibility for his actions.

Authenticity

The goal of being authentic is a strived-for state in the client; it is a must for the therapist. Being authentic means “coming on straight” and taking the risk and responsibility that goes with it. When a person is willing to state what he feels and thinks, to communicate honestly with self and others, he is being authentic.

The Gestalt therapist promotes authenticity by being the model of authenticity and direct communication. This does not mean that he impulsively or indiscriminately acts on his feelings and is completely transparent. Instead, the therapist uses selective authenticity (Cohn, 1970) and states himself in the interest of the therapeutic process. The trained therapist may decide that the
revelation of certain feelings on his part could be toxic to the individual or group he is working with.

To be authentic a person must be willing to stop playing games and to stop manipulating others and the environment for the fulfillment of his wants and needs. He must be willing to ask others directly for what he wants.

**Self-Regulation**

Many Gestalt therapists now use the term *organismic self-regulation*. The belief here is that the organism is capable of selecting for itself what is nourishing; each organism has the potential for picking and choosing what is best.

According to Perls et al. (1951), if the organism is left alone, it will spontaneously regulate itself. If it has been deranged, the tendency is for the organism to right itself. The Gestalt therapist will direct the client's awareness to the total organism in the hope that the client will learn to respond to his own self-regulatory mechanisms. Simkin (see Footnote 1) stated, "In the organismically balanced person, there is the capacity to experience intellectually and emotionally and sensorially." The goal of the therapist is to mobilize all three modes of experiencing so that they can be integrated as a total organism. Most patients have overstressed their "thinking about" mode of experiencing; so, much of the therapeutic work deals with the other two ways of experiencing.

Perls (1969a) described how some people ignore the preferences of the organism. He believed that the organism does not make decisions; he felt decisions to be a man-made institution. He went on to say that the organism always works on the basis of preference. The organism may designate its preference through subtle and some not so subtle ways. For example, a person may be faced with the option of doing something or not doing something; at the thought of doing this particular activity the person may develop an upset stomach, a headache, and anxiety. Because he tells himself this is something he "should" do, he makes the intellectual decision to go ahead—he ignores the organismic messages indicating the preference. Here the person is responding to a "should," which usually discounts the needs and preferences of the organism.

**Behavior Change**

It almost goes without saying that a goal of Gestalt therapy (or any therapy for that matter) is behavior change. Here is where the specifically stated problem of the client is dealt with. For example, a husband may say to the therapist, "I want to be able to communicate my feelings to my wife." Sometimes the successful achievement of the previously mentioned goals will result in a change of behavior; at other times it is necessary to deal directly with the behavior in question. The therapist may assist the husband by helping him become aware of how he prevents himself from the achievement of this goal; it then becomes the responsibility of the client to decide how and what actions he is going to take.

Contrary to some forms of psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy deals with private behavior as well as public behavior.

---

That is, the Gestalt therapist will work with people who want to change a feeling or an attitude. The achievement of this goal may or may not lead to an observable, external behavior change.

Summary

There is some overlap among the goals discussed here; work in one goal may lead to changes in other areas. For example, when the main focus of the therapeutic process has been on awareness, the client may also become more integrated and authentic. On the other hand, the client who comes to trust the self-regulatory mechanisms of the organism almost certainly becomes more aware. Also, the therapist may discover that directing awareness is a technique that helps in the achievement of one or all of the other goals. The general goals of client self-acceptance and self-support may be achieved through the attainment of one or more of the specific goals discussed here.

The theoretical beliefs in the wholeness of man, of man’s tendency to form figures and ground, and the ability of man to use aggression to destroy gestalts so that new needs can be met represent the Gestalt therapy point of view of the conditions necessary for human growth. The goals described here, if achieved, will permit continued client growth.

REFERENCES


Perls, F. Gestalt therapy verbatim. Lafayette, Calif.: Real People Press, 1969. (a)

Perls, F. In and out of the garbage pail. Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1969. (b)


