

Group Counseling

Lecture 9

Gestalt Group Counseling

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Introduction

Gestalt therapy was developed by German researchers Fredrick (Fritz) and Laura Perls and American writer Paul Goodman as an alternative to traditional psychoanalysis. It has its roots in gestalt theory — a way of thinking about human perception that became popular in Europe in the early 20th century. It holds that our minds understand what we experience as a whole rather than individual parts. Gestalt therapy emphasizes the whole person and focuses on the present rather than the past. In contrast, psychoanalysis digs into your subconscious to find buried memories that drive your psychological issues, behavior therapy focuses on behavior and person-centered therapy focuses on the human person. Advanced research in promotion of evidence-based practice in psychology puts Gestalt therapy is one the recently researched therapies in psychology (Brownell, 2019). Gestalt therapy follows these principles; similarity, continuity, figure and ground, proximity, and closure (Corey, Theory and practice of group counseling, 2015).

Expected Learning Outcomes

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

- i. Define the term gestalt therapy.
- ii. Explain the key concepts of gestalt therapy.
- iii. Describe the gestalt group counseling process.

Defining Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy is considered a type of humanistic therapy. That means it starts with the belief that people are inherently good and have the ability and desire to move their lives in a positive direction. Problems happen when one is not true to self. It is also a kind of experiential therapy. Experiential therapy goes beyond talking and uses activities such as art, music, or getting out into nature to help you identify and explore the emotions attached to one's experiences. Sometimes people judge a person's behavior from one aspect but the problem they could be going through could be from other aspects of their being. ([Jabeen Begum, MD](#) on April 19, 2024, <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-is-gestalt-therapy>).

Gestalt Therapy Concepts

Gestalt therapy concepts are discussed as discussed Corey (Corey, Theory and practice of group counseling, 2015)(Corey, Theory and practice of counseling and counseling psychotherapy, 2009) & (O'Leary, 2013).

Self-awareness.

According to gestalt therapy, a client is held back by not understanding him/herself, their motivations, and the ways they add to their own unhappiness. There is a lot of emphasis on being aware of one's emotions, thought patterns, and even physical feelings so one can learn who they truly are and accept self fully. The group members are encouraged to enhance their self-awareness, so they get a full understanding and acceptance of themselves and others too.

Here and now.

In gestalt therapy, what matters is who one is and how one feels in the present moment. The past is only important to the extent that it influences one's present thoughts and behavior. A member

may be encouraged to "re-experience" a past event in a therapy session to explore how they feel about it now. It helps a member to stop worrying about the future or potential problems and deal only with what is in front of them. Preoccupation with the present awareness removes anxieties about the past and the future making the client more grounded in the here and now experiences.

Paradoxical change. The theory behind this concept is that the best way to change is by not trying. Forcing oneself to be something one is not only causes stress and anxiety. But understanding and accepting who one really is opens the way for personal growth to happen naturally. People use a lot of energy to change circumstances that may be rigid and stubborn to change. One can use their energy to change what is changeable and letting go of what seems to be hard to change. This lessens anxieties surrounding the desire to change situations in turn relaxing the person without pressure. Nature ideally takes her own course.

Taking responsibility.

This is acknowledging the role that our thoughts and behaviors play in our experiences and relationships. One is encouraged to accept the consequences of their actions and stop blaming others for their problems. Taking responsibility can help participants interact with others in a more positive way. It also helps them understand that one has control in their life — one can take care of their own needs and they do not have to rely on someone else for fulfillment. Personal responsibility means personal power and control not vice versa.

Closure.

Gestalt therapy holds that problems can arise from unexpressed emotions and experiences in the past that a client has not fully processed. The ways that they choose to deal with pain may separate them from their true self. By dealing with this "unfinished business," one can let go of emotions

they have been holding in and become whole again. People are distressed by a variety of past issues that keep cropping back and forth in their lives if not processed. Once processed, they cease to be a bother and even if they are recalled, they do not alter the way the person feels, thinks and behaves in the present moment.

Mind-body Connection.

In gestalt therapy, physical responses can give insight into a client's emotions, so they are encouraged to pay attention to what their body may be telling them. For example, as a group therapist ask if they may be physically feeling a certain emotion and locate it in the body. Also, emotional issues can lead to physical problems, so dealing with one can help the other. In gestalt group therapy, body scanning is encouraged to locate blocked emotions in the body which serv to alter the person's mood and actions as well.

Gestalt Therapy Techniques

Gestalt therapy can be done one-on-one or in a group. It is also sometimes used in business, school, or other organizational settings to improve work relationships and performance. Therapists are encouraged to improvise and experiment, based on the patient's unique experiences and needs. While that makes sessions very individualized, certain techniques are commonly used.

Empty chair.

This is the exercise probably most associated with gestalt therapy. It can help with relationship issues and self-discovery. One sits with an empty chair and talk to it as if it's someone they have a problem with. The chair can also stand in for a part of oneself. The idea is that a self-dialogue may be more effective than talking about one's issues with the therapist. In group sessions,

members with unresolved issues are encouraged to use the empty chair technique to get issues resolved and closure.

Exaggeration.

This technique uses physical behavior to try to uncover thoughts and emotions one may not be aware of. The therapist pays close attention to the client's body language. If one has a physical reaction to something one is talking about, such as frowning or shifting in their seat, the counselor asks them to repeat it in an exaggerated way. Then, they explore the emotion their feeling and how it's connected to their experience. The focus shifts from negative feelings and actions to objectivity about the issue with a deeper awareness.

Dramatization.

Various kinds of acting are a part of gestalt therapy. Members are asked to do role-playing, where they act out both sides of a conversation between them and someone they conflict with. That is sometimes called the two-chair technique. Only a trained experienced therapist may have members recreate a painful or traumatic moment from their past so you can re-experience the emotions in the present and process them.

Using "I" Statements.

This technique helps one to focus on their own actions and feelings and take responsibility for them, rather than blaming others. For example, instead of a member saying something or someone makes them angry, the therapist will encourage them to say, "I feel angry when." may be you talk tome they way you do or when you walk away from me when I need to talk and so on. This is reality living and removes facades and denials in one's life.

Confrontation.

If the therapist detects something that a client is trying to avoid, they'll pursue it and challenge them to face it. This technique can seem too aggressive and is not as much a part of gestalt therapy as it was earlier. If it must be done, then relevance and due sensitivity to the client's feelings should be considered. Confrontation and support must go together.

Creative or Physical Activities.

Rather than passive talking, gestalt therapy emphasizes movement and activity. It involves art activities, such as drawing, sculpting, or dancing, to help one learn to be mindful and focus on the present. Mindfulness helps in anchoring a person in the present without negative emotions that block one's future.

Dreams.

The therapist may help a member explore dreams and find meaning in them, but they will not try to interpret them for a client. For the members in the group, avoid allowing them to interpret other members' dreams to avoid confusion and misinterpretation.

Topdog/underdog.

This is a type of role-playing exercise, in which participants act out two different aspects of their personality: the critical part that's trying to push them to be or act a certain way, and the part of that feels weak and helpless and resists internal demands to change. The idea is to create balance and equal feeling.

Gestalt Therapy Process

If an individual does not access the underlying issues (referred to as the ground beneath the figure), they are likely to have blocked energy within and this energy can be a barrier to experiencing moment to moment awareness. Therefore, for effective therapy to take place, the group counselors need to move the participants from this energy block to energy release. Once the participants are aware of their blocks, their distorted perception (polarized view) which could have been formed in the past changes, and so are their feelings thus bringing a balance. They learn to take personal responsibility for their own feelings and thoughts together with their actions and this balance brings closure ultimately (Yalom , 2015).

Peeling Off Layers of Neurosis

The group experience helps in normalizing the process in the following stages:

- *Phony*- Games, assumed roles, react in stereotyped, unauthentic ways. Pretending.
- *Phobic*- Avoidance (of pain), hide real self, act out fears, feel vulnerable and helpless.
Denying.
- *Impasse*- Appear stuck and unable to meet counseling goals. No sense of direction.
- *Implosive*- Become aware of ways they limit themselves. Experiment with change of unfinished business and move toward integration of fragmented parts. Vulnerable.
- *Explosive*- Experience re-integration of fragmented parts, wholeness, authentic, gain energy, express emotions, move toward actualization and authenticity.

Conclusion

In this lecture, we have defined the term gestalt therapy, explained the key concepts and techniques of gestalt therapy, and described the process of gestalt group therapy. In our follow up lecture (10), we shall learn more about integrative group counseling.

References

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