

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy

## Gestalt Therapy

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Gestalt therapy is an existentially based humanistic therapy arising out of Fritz and Laura Perls's discrimination and integration of ideas from many traditions, philosophies, narratives, disciplines, and theories beginning in Germany in the 1920s. Born as a revision of Sigmund Freud's theories, it has evolved into a major contributor to mainstream psychotherapy—from a psychoanalytical/biological/Aristotelian/deterministic foundation to a humanistic/existential/experiential psychotherapy wherein restoration and holism replace dissection and fragmentation and phenomenology (personal meaning making) replaces interpretation.

[p. 457 ↓ ] *Gestalt* is a German word that translates into English as “a whole,” “a pattern,” “an organization,” or “a configuration.” While the hallmark of Gestalt psychology is finding shared ways by which people organize their perceptions and phenomenology, the task of Gestalt therapy can be seen as becoming aware of and understanding the idiosyncratic organizing patterns of each individual.

## Historical Context

Fritz Perls, M.D., codeveloper of Gestalt therapy with his wife, Laura Posner Perls, Ph.D., was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. In 1926, Perls became an assistant to Kurt Goldstein, M.D., at the Neuropsychiatric Institute in Frankfurt, Germany. Goldstein, collaborating with the experimental Gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb, worked with brain-injured World War I German soldiers. Their organismic, holistic, and integrative approach to working with and understanding these soldiers was in sharp contrast to the usual approach of the times, which was attending to piecemeal body or brain parts. Fritz took this holistic approach and integrated it into Gestalt therapy. He was also heavily influenced by several of his own analysts, especially Wilhelm Reich and Karen Horney.

At the same time, Laura Perls was a psychology doctoral student at Frankfurt am Main University, studying with luminaries such as Adhémar Gelb, Max Wertheimer in Gestalt psychology (including field theory), Martin Buber and Paul Tillich in philosophy, as well as working in Goldstein's laboratory. She also trained and became a psychoanalyst. Later in New York City, Fritz Perls was heavily influenced by Paul Goodman (she

was his collaborator on his seminal 1951 book *Gestalt Therapy*), Erich Fromm, Clara Thompson, and Harry Stack Sullivan.

Although Gestalt therapy today seems to be enjoying a renaissance in the United States after some decades of losing popularity, it is burgeoning in most of Europe, Australia, Mexico, and South America. In the United States, much of what Gestalt therapy introduced to the world from the late 1930s until today has been integrated into many contemporary psychotherapies—for example, the importance and usefulness of the “real” relationship, not just transference; the organismic/environmental field (ecology); the importance of awareness; and the movement from interpretation to phenomenology.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Every serious approach to psychotherapy requires a worldview of human nature and behavior if it is to provide an integrated approach to psychotherapy. Without such a worldview, “therapy” is reduced to a collage or hodgepodge of haphazard techniques, beliefs, traditions, and procedures used without consideration of the context that produced them—eclectic rather than integrative.

Gestalt therapy’s worldview sees human beings as self-regulating organisms of the field who create meaning via their phenomenological organization (meaning making). Self-regulation involves human beings going toward (aggressing) need satisfaction in interaction with their world at the boundary, discriminating what to take in and assimilating and what to reject in the service of survival and to allow higher order needs to flourish. To rephrase, children are born self-regulating in a contextual world and are usually able to survive by the meaning they make of what they experience. They are able to respond appropriately enough for them and the environment to survive. Especially in complex societies, this is not done without creating some character problems (personality issues) for later living in the world. Thus, Gestalt therapy’s process goal is to restore self-regulation within the person’s environment and not to “fix” people in any particular way. Given this basic assumption, some of the theoretical givens of Gestalt therapy include its reliance on existentialism, field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue.

Gestalt therapy was heavily influenced by the existentialists (and Buddhists). The existential themes that had the most meaning for Fritz Perls were *authenticity* (being true to oneself despite external pressures); *freedom* (the power to act or think as one chooses without restraint but within limits); *responsibility* for our choices, the meanings we make, and the actions we take; and *anxiety* that is created by being authentic in a world that has no meaning except that which we create. Thus, existential anxiety is to a large part normalized as part of being human.

Field theory was established by Gestalt perceptual psychology, particularly the work of [p. 458 ↓ ] Kurt Levin (borrowing from quantum field theory). It maintains that everything is related to everything else and is in constant movement and flux. An individual person is affected not just by his or her psyche but also by genetics, hormones, biochemicals, family, ethnicity, religion, class, race, nationality, politics, economics, history, geography, weather, and so on. The person is not “in” the field but rather “of” the field, interacting, effecting and being affected.

Phenomenology is the process by which human beings make meaning of their sensorial experience— what they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Meaning is the relationship between figure (what stands out) and ground (background). In other words, meaning is not in the figure and not in the ground; rather it is in the relationship between the two. How individuals choose, organize, and contribute to the construction of what becomes figural for them and what background they bring to bear are critical. Thus, figure organizes ground, and ground gives meaning to the figure. Depending on the ground and the need that a person brings to the figure of a wooden baseball bat, the meaning could be anticipation of a fun game, a weapon, firewood to keep warm, a wedge to hold a cover open, an instrument to break open a car window, a museum piece, a collector’s item, a childhood dream, and so on.

Gestalt therapy borrows heavily from Buber’s concept of I–It and I–Thou dialogic relating. While much of life is I–It (strategic relating), primary relationships, close friends, and, hopefully, therapeutic relationships have more of an I–Thou quality—not managed and without attempts to control the outcome. The “freshest fish” (most “experience near”) for Gestalt therapy is the relationship between the therapist and the client. While much of what the client brings into therapy is his or her phenomenological narrative of things happening in his or her outside life (which is as it should be to begin), it is only

in the relationship between the client and the therapist that both people have access to the “same” transactions. Thus, each person, client and therapist, has the opportunity to share and engage in a real relationship—a sharing of their two phenomenologies—wherein differences occur that may lead to awareness. Frequently, the inevitable and inadvertent ruptures of connection and the subsequent repair, with humility, authenticity, and responsibility, can be some of the most important therapeutic interactions. To put it another way, when the potential value of the relationship is in the outcome, I–It (strategic relating) is appropriate to the situation; when the potential value of the relationship is in the relating, I–Thou (authentic relating) is appropriate to the situation. Most relationships are in some kind of balance of both domains.

What makes Gestalt therapy so deliciously difficult to define is exactly what makes it so exquisitely creative, vital, and procreative. With the three major pillars as a foundation (field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue), each Gestalt theorist or therapist organizes the various other elements within the domain of Gestalt therapy differently. Gestalt therapy is based on the metatheory that there is no single and fixed Gestalt therapy theory. Rather, each Gestalt therapy theorist or therapist organizes, prioritizes, and integrates many of the same ideas and concepts in different orders of priority and integrations. Each theorist and therapist within Gestalt therapy is doing at the microlevel what Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman did in the larger (macro) field—choosing, organizing, and integrating from all of what was in the larger field at those times, including the history of the field.

Fritz Perls was emphatic that there was nothing new in Gestalt therapy, that it was the *organization* (Gestalt) of all of these elements that was new. The Chilean biologists and philosophers Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela remind us that we are always looking through a lens, which is why we need multiple lenses to maintain perspective and to keep “objective reality” in “parentheses.” Thus, perspective and awareness are born out of difference. The lens you use both determines and limits what you see. If you only use a telescope, you will never see an ant, and if you use only a microscope, you will never see an elephant.

## Major Concepts

Some of the major concepts that underlie Gestalt theory include the following: the whole is different from (sometimes more than) the sum of its parts, organismic/environmental field as an ecosystem, self-regulation, character, awareness and insight, difference, process, ecology, and body and voice.

### The Whole Is Different From (Sometimes More Than) the Sum of Its Parts

All the parts of a car laid out on the ground give you many metal, rubber, ceramic, liquid, and plastic bits and pieces. However, organize them in a very particular relationship to one another and you have a car in which you can now drive away— certainly *different from* and, in this instance, *more than* the sum of its parts. Organize them randomly and you may have an art project—or a pile of junk.

### Organismic/Environmental Field as an Ecosystem

In contrast to classical psychoanalysis at the time, Fritz Perls maintained that to understand any living organism, you must understand it in its interaction with its environment, a living system of the larger field. Classical psychoanalysis was interested in the individual psyche and not particularly in the person's interaction with his or her environment. This concept has been slowly assimilated into most current psychotherapeutic models.

# Self-Regulation

The biological imperative for any living organism is survival. Given this, Gestalt therapy assumes that human beings are born self-regulating within their environment. Their interactions with the field (their world), in the service of survival, accumulate clusters of habits and ways of perceiving and acting—originally healthy—that sometimes become fixed and habitual (below awareness) and continue acontextually, sometimes interrupting self-regulation in the present. The relevant past is the past that interrupts healthy functioning in the present, where it is accessible, palpable, experiential, experimentable, and verifiable.

# Character

Character is made up of fixed clusters or patterns of perceptual organization (meaning making) and behaviors from historical or background influences, which are below awareness, recurring, and invariant. These are the matrices that make up character.

Children make the best creative adjustment they are capable of in the service of survival. When a child is born into a crazy, explosive, alcoholic, wartorn, erratic, or controlling family, she may learn to keep her mouth shut, stay back, and scan until the world looks safe again. This is healthy. When, however, this style of being in the world becomes fixed, habitual, and goes below the awareness threshold (procedural memory), this is the birth of character. Character, then, is the freeze-framing of what was once a creative, adaptive, and usually healthy perception and/or response and is now acontextual, anachronistic, and obsolete.

Character is made up of actual experiences and introjects, which are rules and “shoulds” that are crammed down the child’s throat by parents, culture, church, government, and so on—and swallowed whole by the child—before the child has the ability to discriminate. Concurrently, contact boundary history, traumas, attachment history, vicarious learning, media, and culture all contribute to character formation.



Through the prism of Gestalt therapy's character, transference can be seen as "character in motion"—the transferring of ways of perceiving others that have become fixed and below awareness and are triggered in the present. Again, the methodology of *awareness through difference* becomes important for the client to learn *how* to discriminate between the dialogic relationship in the room and the transferred relationship. Discrimination can only happen experientially if there are two relationships to compare and access difference. For this, the therapist must "show up." Again, difference precedes and is required for awareness.

## Awareness and Insight

Awareness is both the methodology and part of the goal of Gestalt therapy—an integral requirement for the restoration of self-regulation within the person's environment. One of the defining characteristics of awareness (cognitive, affective, and sensorial) is being in contact with what you are doing when you are actually doing it. Insight, as compared with awareness, is something you believe you know about yourself, and often based on noticing, interpreting or speculating, and extrapolating. Insight is primarily a cognitive analysis of a real or alleged pattern of what one does or why one does what one does.

## Difference

How people deal with differences is at the root of most difficulties in relationships—especially intimate relationships. Difference is typically seen in a negative way, according to most Western phenomenology. Having a bad reputation, difference is seen as dangerous, a threat to connection or autonomy, critical, disloyal, betrayal, and/or leading to conflict and therefore frequently avoided. Difference, which requires *two* individuals (needing a boundary to separate *and* connect), is absolutely necessary for awareness. There can be no awareness without difference. Here, physics and psychology are very similar: Change (movement) is needed for difference, difference is needed for awareness, and awareness is needed for choice. The distilled and fundamental task of therapy is awareness—requiring the welcoming and engaging of difference rather than trying to get rid of it. Trying to get rid of difference ultimately

leads to deferring (confluence or fusion, with accompanying loss of self), withdrawal or isolation (with accompanying loss of other), or conflict (trying to eradicate difference by making the other like me). Conflict typically escalates to eventual explosion and then withdrawal.

## Process

Process refers to the repetitive patterns, sequences of perceptions, and contacts and behaviors, unique to each individual, that organize and structure one's meaning making and behavior. When below the awareness threshold, these repetitive patterns or processes (character) organize what one sees, hears, touches, smells, and tastes — contouring the meaning of these as well as the behavior one responds with. These characterological processes interrupt self-regulation in the present, and the task of therapy is to interrupt those interruptions by bringing them into awareness. Differences in phenomenology between the client and the therapist frequently serve as the catalyst to highlight these processes—the “fresh fish.”

## Ecology

Ecology is the branch of biology that studies the relationship of living organisms to their environment, including other organisms. The similarity of “character” and “pollutants” is both striking and illuminating. Some ecologists define “pollutants” as “resources out of place.” There is nothing inherently wrong or bad about the pollutant. What makes it “bad” is that it is out of place or balance. Even arsenic, a highly poisonous substance, has been found to be useful in the treatment of cancer and syphilis. Similarly, character, useful perceptually organizing the world and responding to it in one's initial context, can prevent self-regulation when invoked in another context without awareness. For instance, an Inuit dressed in furs for a Siberian winter would be wearing a “resource out of place” in Karachi in July. It would probably kill him.

## Body and Voice

From Wilhelm Reich to Fritz Perls and from Elsa Gindler to Laura Perls, the body has always been an important dimension of Gestalt therapy— especially breathing and voice. Fritz Perls maintained that the voice was the single best diagnostic cue of how a person is in the world (e.g., tight, breathless, soft, sharp, relaxed, supported by breathing or not).

## Techniques

Techniques are the least important part of Gestalt therapy. However, some therapists still erroneously believe that Gestalt therapy is a bag of techniques that define the therapy—a leftover from a few loud, charismatic, misled, and self-appointed practitioners from the 1960s who copied some of Fritz Perls's experiments and codified them into cliché techniques separated from their origins. When the client and the therapist are stuck and one of them does something different and useful information is generated, this is creativity. When that same transaction with the world is used again in a similar situation, perhaps with a different client, this is technique. The creativity is born of the ground from which Gestalt therapy emerges and not from fitting the client into the therapist's procrustean assortment of techniques. What makes Gestalt therapy is the field, phenomenological, and dialogic stance of the therapist in the service of awareness and the restoration of the client's [p. 461 ↓ ] self-regulation. With this in mind, a number of ideas underlie how at least some Gestalt therapists conduct therapy, including using experiments, making contact with clients, dialogue, examining figure formation and destruction, and being connected and maintaining self. This section concludes with a discussion of some typical techniques that have been used over the years.

## Experiments

The purpose of the use of experiments in Gestalt therapy is fundamentally based on the experiment yielding new and *different* experiential data, which allows awareness. It is

the *difference* that is crucial, whether arrived at by an experiment or by any other means (dialogue, movement, breathing, psychoeducation, etc.).

## Contact

Contact is the meeting between one person and another, or a person and his or her environment. One cannot “make” contact with another person. A person can optimize the possibility of contact happening by sharing his or her primary experience of the moment, regardless of the content. If the other person is receptive and even willing to share his or her primary experience at that moment, contact can happen in the “in-between.” Of course, such authenticity must be modulated by the context, the degree of connection already established with the other, and “common” sense. Laura Perls maintained that “mental health” might be defined as contact and withdrawal, both with support.

## Figure Formation and Destruction

How people form and dissolve figures helps Gestalt therapy track where on the cycle of experience the interruption to a smooth flow occurs. This may in the future lead to a complete process system of “diagnosis.” Incomplete Gestalten (“unfinished business”) are frequently considered to be interruptions to self-regulation.

## Being Connected and Maintaining Self

Although not original to Gestalt therapy, the basic human dilemma is seen as how to be connected to another and maintain a self. This is not a problem searching for a resolution but rather a living process in the endless dance of connection and separation —one not unlike breathing.

## Use of Techniques

Although therapists are warned to avoid using specific “techniques” as a goal in and of itself, there have been a number of techniques that have become known over the years to have originated with Gestalt therapy. These approaches are sometimes used by Gestalt therapists, and others, in an effort to help the client become more aware of self, gain insight, and understand how he or she has become cut off from parts of self. A few of the more prominent approaches are as follows: (a) using “now” language, (b) I–Thou communication, (c) experiencing the present, (d) making statements out of questions, (e) the dialogue game, (f) the empty chair technique, (g) *I take responsibility for that*, (h) playing the projection, (i) exaggeration technique, and (j) making the rounds. Many of these well-known Gestalt techniques came from Fritz Perls’s experiments at increasing awareness at different times in his career. They neither define Gestalt therapy, nor are they necessary to do Gestalt therapy.

## Therapeutic Process

The therapeutic process in Gestalt therapy emerges out of the therapist meeting the client from a dialogic, horizontal, and supportive stance. Therapy can be short-term or protracted, depending on the needs and desires of the client in consultation with the therapist. The goals of Gestalt therapy are awareness and choice at three levels— (1) awareness of content, (2) awareness of process, and (3) awareness of awareness (learning how to become aware—deutero learning)—so that therapy can become self-sustaining and self-regulation can be restored and maintained.

**See also** [Horney, Karen](#); [Humanistic Psychoanalysis of Erich Fromm](#); [Mindfulness Techniques](#); [Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy](#); [Reich, Wilhelm](#); [Sullivan, Harry Stack](#)

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