

### STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE GESTALT GROUP

Dimension	Initial Stage	Working Stage	Final Stage
Key developmental tasks and goals	A central goal is to gain here-and-now awareness of what is being felt, sensed, and thought; group members must experiment and experience. Personal goals include achieving contact with self and others and defining one's boundaries with clarity.	Members deal with unfinished business from the past that is impeding full functioning now. The task is to integrate polarities. Group therapy is aimed at helping members give expression to the side of themselves they tend to repress.	Members assume personal responsibility, which means that they integrate the fragmented aspects of their personalities. By achieving a moment-to-moment awareness of whatever is being experienced, members have the means within themselves to make changes.
Role and tasks of group leader	It is the leader's task to follow whatever leads are provided by group members; in this way members are able to become aware of the "what" and the "how" of their experiencing. The leader functions much like an artist inventing techniques that arise from the material in the group. Leaders use themselves as persons in the group.	The leader's task is to pay close attention to both the verbal and nonverbal messages of members and to go with what is obvious. Leader suggests experiments designed to enhance and intensify the experiences of the members. Leader pays attention to energy and helps members recognize their resistance.	After a piece of work is completed, the leader may ask members to say how they are feeling. There is not much emphasis on cognitive structuring or behavior modification. It is assumed that once members gain an awareness of what they are doing to prevent themselves from fully experiencing the moment, they are capable of changing.
Role of group members	Members are expected to focus on the here-and-now and to reexperience past conflicts as though they were going on now. Members decide what they will explore in the group. Members are challenged to accept responsibility for whatever they are experiencing and doing. They learn to live up to their own expectations, and they make decisions.	Members are expected to directly communicate to one another and to make "I" statements. They are discouraged from asking "why" questions. The focus is on exploration of feelings. To experience these feelings fully, members take part in a variety of action-oriented activities. They don't talk about problems; rather, they act out their various roles and conflicts.	Members give and receive feedback. They have the opportunity to identify unfinished business from their past that impedes present functioning and to work through impasses. By gaining awareness of areas that were out of consciousness, they become more integrated. They are increasingly able to live with their own polarities.

2. The Gestalt view is that people are essentially responsible for their own conflicts and that they have the capacity to deal with their life problems. Therefore, group members tend to make their own interpretations and to discover for themselves the meaning of their experiences.
3. Gestalt therapists use experiments when assisting group members to increase their awareness. Through group interaction, members will become more aware of conflicts and places where they “get stuck” (arrive at an impasse). In the group members can experiment with a variety of ways to work through the impasse and move to a new level of integration.
4. One of the group leader’s tasks is to help members locate the ways in which they are blocking energy and expressing their resistance in their body. Through body-awareness work, members are mobilized and can take an active responsibility for their therapy. They can then be encouraged to try more adaptive behaviors.
5. Although the Gestalt leader encourages members to assume responsibility for expanding their awareness, the leader also takes an active role in creating experiments designed to help members tap their resources. The essence of creative therapy is designing experiments that grow out of the existential situation of the therapy encounter. Through these experiments, members are able to confront the crises of their lives by playing out their troubled relationships in the safety of the therapeutic setting.

## Glossary of Key Terms for Gestalt Therapy

**Awareness** The process of attending to and observing one’s own senses, thoughts, feelings, and actions; paying attention to the flow of one’s experiences in the moment.

**Blocks to energy** Paying attention to where energy is located, how it is used, and how it can be blocked.

**Confluence** A disturbance in which the sense of the boundary between self and environment is lost.

**Confrontation** An invitation for the client to become aware of discrepancies between verbal and nonverbal expressions, between feelings and actions, or between thoughts and feelings.

**Deflection** A way of avoiding contact and awareness by being vague and indirect.

**Dichotomy** A split by which a person experiences or sees opposing forces; a polarity (tough/ tender, open/closed).

**Experiments** Interventions designed to enhance here-and-now awareness; activities members try out in a group as a way of testing new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

**Field theory** The notion of the individual being viewed in his or her environment, or in the context of a constantly changing field.

**Figure-formation process** Describes how the individual organizes the environment from moment to moment and how the emerging focus of attention is on what is figural.

**Holism** A core concept in Gestalt theory that implies that all nature is a unified and coherent whole.

Techniques	<p>Leader uses “what” and “how” questions, but not “why” questions, to help members focus on themselves and what they are experiencing. Leaders may use many experiments including fantasy approaches, asking people to pay attention to what they are experiencing physically, thinking out loud, and so on. The skilled leader avoids grabbing techniques from a bag. Rather, the leader creates experiments that express what is going on in the group now.</p>	<p>A wide range of experiments all have the general goal of helping members intensify their experiencing in the present moment. Members may explore dreams by becoming all parts of their dreams; they may engage in role playing in which they act out all the parts; or they may exaggerate a particular gesture or mannerism. Symbolic encounters are used to help members deal with unfinished situations.</p>	<p>Members can be asked to enact a situation the way they’d like it to be; they play all the parts. Members are often asked to give a new ending to an old and unfinished situation. Experiments help members see how past unfinished situations get in the way of effective living in the present. Members are asked to practice and experiment with new ways outside of the group. Action follows experiencing.</p>
Questions to consider	<p>Are you able to create a climate within the group that encourages members to try out creative experiments? Have you prepared them for Gestalt techniques? Have you earned their respect and trust? Do they see benefits in participating in a variety of experiments aimed at enhancing their awareness?</p> <p>Do you avoid using planned techniques to make something happen in a group? Can you follow the process and invent a technique that will highlight members’ concerns?</p> <p>Do you take care to avoid being mechanical in using techniques? Are the methods you employ an extension of the person you are?</p>	<p>Do you invite members to take part in an experiment as opposed to commanding them?</p> <p>Can you respect resistance in a group member? Are you able to work therapeutically with resistance?</p> <p>Do you focus on what is going on within the group now? Are you able to pay attention to the subtle nonverbal messages and work with them?</p> <p>Do you help members stay with their present experience and not talk about what they are thinking or feeling?</p> <p>Do you bring yourself in as a person, and do you respond to others in personal ways?</p>	<p>How can you create experiments that will help members gain awareness of what they are doing to prevent themselves from being fully in the present?</p> <p>How can members be helped to work through unfinished business that interferes with living now in a vital way? How can any unfinished business within the group be addressed?</p> <p>Have the members recognized ways in which they block their strengths and keep themselves from living the way they want?</p> <p>Are you able to help members deal with their feelings about termination? Do you encourage them to express feelings about separation?</p>

Reactions: Summarize your reactions to the Gestalt perspective on group developmental stages. What do you like *most?* *least?* What aspects of this approach would you incorporate in your style of leadership?

**Introjection** The uncritical acceptance of others' beliefs and standards without assimilating them into one's own personality.

**Paradoxical theory of change** A concept that implies that individuals change when they become aware of what they are, as opposed to attempting to become what they are not.

**Projection** The process by which we disown certain aspects of ourselves by ascribing them to the environment; the opposite of introjection.

**Rehearsal** Internal processing about the roles we think we are expected to play. As a technique, members are asked to "rehearse out loud" so that others can experience the internal process of thinking and censoring.

**Relational Gestalt therapy** A supportive and compassionate style that emphasizes dialogue in the therapeutic relationship.

**Retroreflection** The act of turning back onto ourselves something we would like to do (or have done) to someone else.

**Unfinished business** Unexpressed feelings (such as resentment, guilt, anger, grief) dating back to childhood that now interfere with effective psychological functioning; needless emotional debris that clutters present-centered awareness.

## Exercises and Activities for Gestalt Groups

### Rationale

Gestalt therapy makes use of a variety of action-oriented methods that are designed to intensify what members are experiencing. Instead of discussing conflicts, for example, members are encouraged to "become the conflict." The idea is to fully experience every dimension of oneself (to be authentic). The Gestalt therapist will suggest experiments to help members try some new behavior and thus experience everything fully.

It is important that the following exercises *not* be done mechanically. Each exercise is best if it is tailored to the unique needs of the members in your class/group. Further, it is a good idea to give members some preparation before springing an experiment on them. Enlist the cooperation of group members by giving a brief explanation of the basic purpose of each exercise. By trying many of the exercises in your own small group, you will be in a better position to know which of these techniques you might want to use when you are a group leader.

### Exercises

1. *Here-and-now versus there-and-then.* Talk about a personal experience in the past tense for about three minutes. Then, relive the same experience as though it were happening in the present. What difference do you notice between these three-minute exercises? What value do you see in encouraging people in groups to make past experiences into present-centered ones?
2. *Bringing the future into the now.* Are you anticipating any future confrontations? This exercise can be a form of rehearsal. Using the two-chair technique, take turns being yourself and then becoming the person you expect to confront, then be yourself, and so on for a brief period of time. Make this future event happen in the here-and-now. When you are finished, discuss what this experience was like. What did you learn through the experiment? What are your fears and hopes regarding this future event?