

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST & PSYCHOTHERAPIST

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WHAT IS GESTALT THERAPY?

Gestalt therapy is a type of psychotherapy that emphasises the process of becoming whole. Several key principles guide my use of Gestalt therapy:

Change happens in the present

Gestalt therapy emphasises examining experience in the present moment because we live our lives in the present time. Just as past issues create problems in the present, these problems can be resolved in the present. Even though what has happened in the past can not be undone, the way that this impacts on our lives in the present can be changed.

Change happens through acceptance

Another key difference between Gestalt and other forms of therapy is the understanding of how change happens. One way that change can occur can be described as a coaching model. This model is very familiar to us all – we have a goal, we get expert help on how to reach that goal, and we practice a lot. It is the kind of model that often underlies cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

In contrast, according to a Gestalt therapy approach, change is unlikely to happen by trying harder to change – in fact this may prevent change. Trying harder to change is like having someone push us – the most likely thing to happen is that we push back. Instead, in a Gestalt approach change happens through accepting oneself. This model of change is more closely aligned with what happens in nature. For example, a tree does not have a conscious goal in mind “to be a big tree” and does not seek out a tree coach. Instead, if the tree is given the nutrients it needs within the ecosystem, then it will unfold as nature intended. This model of change is similar to some Buddhist approaches, and is also seen in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Change happens through experience

One thing that Gestalt therapy shares with the coaching style is the need for real practice. Change is unlikely to happen if it is just talked about – what is talked about must be felt and put into practice. Similar to CBT, Gestalt therapy may include designing experiments to explore issues or to strengthen our capacity to act.

Change happens in relationships

Our lives are also surrounded by relationships – our relationships with people, our environment, our society and our culture. My belief is that just as harm can be done in relationships, healing also occurs within relationships. Any outcomes achieved in counselling emerge from the relationship between therapist and client. For this reason alone there is value in attending to the quality of the relationship. Within this relationship, issues of trust can be explored, problems can be examined, self-awareness and interpersonal skills can be learnt.

In addition, the relationship between therapist and client often echoes the relationships people have outside the therapy room. This means that examining the relationship between the therapist and client can provide immediate and useful information about the person’s unmet needs, and about their ways of relating.

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Change involves the whole person

Finally, Gestalt therapy accepts all aspects of an individual's being – emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual, and bodily. However, often in counselling the cognitive and verbal sides of a person are emphasised, at the expense of the other sides – therapy does after all involve a lot of talking. As a result, Gestalt therapy has an emphasis on attending to bodily processes.

To me attending to the body in therapy makes a lot of sense because we live in our bodies, and our emotions are expressed in our bodies. For example, most of us know that the emotional experience of stress can be felt in the body – such as shoulders. Trauma can also be remembered in the body, and at a more subtle level psychological and emotional processes fundamental to being human – such as reaching out to another person – have their counterpart in the muscles and structures used to physically reach out to another person.

For example, body oriented practices can include:

- Breathing exercises
- Calming & grounding exercises
- Observing body actions in response to what is being discussed
- Exploring the meaning of posture and movement patterns
- Practicing staying present to body sensations

Without attending to your bodily experience, therapy may be incomplete, or in some cases ineffective.

A note on touch

In recognition of potential pitfalls and cultural positions regarding touch, my practice rarely involves touch (apart from when I shake someone's hand).

If you would like more information about Gestalt Therapy would like to make an appointment, please ring me on 0409 543 341 or email me at

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