

Psychotherapy Guidebook

GESTALT SYNERGY

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Gestalt Synergy

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DEFINITION

Up until the last decade, psychotherapy focused on a person's verbal behavior. Body work was separate. We are now beginning to see, however, therapeutic forms that treat the whole person, using both verbal and nonverbal (body/mind) approaches. Gestalt Synergy addresses each person as an inseparable combination of body, mind, and spirit. It recognizes that all sensory channels of the human organism provide entry to the whole in different ways at different times.

Gestalt Synergy, founded and developed by myself, is a means for contacting, expressing, and working through emotions and body tensions with touch, gentle body movements, and Gestalt Therapy. Combining the theoretical and practical elements from the work of F. M. Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Fritz and Laura Perls, this unique client-centered therapy is guided by the following concepts:

1. The responsibility for change rests with the client. The synergist is there to guide and facilitate that change.

2. Respect is given to the client's "boundaries." The client does only what he is ready to risk doing.
3. The synergist gives special attention to the client's nonverbal experience — breathing patterns, body image, body position (alignment and posture), gestures, facial expression, and tone of voice — bridging what the client thinks he is doing with what he is actually doing.
4. The focus is on the present — the here-and-now. The client reviews the past in present time resolving "unfinished business."
5. Life attitudes are reflected through our posture, movement patterns, and energy release.
6. Every act involves the whole psychophysical person. The use of one part of the body affects the whole body.
7. Without awareness, we cannot change.
8. The minute you "think," muscles receive the message to move.
9. You may be unknowingly hurting yourself by habitually maintaining a posture which "seems" right.
10. In general, habit patterns are not reflexes; they are learned.
11. Conscious control can be exerted over habit patterns. You have the ability to "inhibit" habitual patterns and choose an alternate route.

12. Conscious bodily control increases a person's life choices.

HISTORY

I can best describe the history of Gestalt Synergy by relating my own experience. Formally trained at the Juilliard School of Music, I played the viola and piano and conducted choirs and orchestras for over twenty years. This strenuous activity finally took its toll; and I began to suffer severe backaches and physical tension. Friends recommended the Alexander Technique — a system designed to teach proper use of the body — to help relieve the physical pressure (see the Alexander Technique). I soon began taking lessons with Judith Liebowitz.

As the lessons progressed, I was often confused by the emotional and physical changes I underwent. My try-harder-goal orientation was being questioned. I once asked my teacher during a session, “How am I doing? Getting better?” To which she replied, “You’re doing. When you notice and accept your body as it is, change will be possible.” Although I didn’t understand what was happening, intellectually, I continued with the lessons because I felt better. The teacher’s touch often facilitated emotional release — I felt sad, angry, happy, etc. She, untrained as a therapist, suggested I seek professional psychotherapeutic help to understand the intense feelings released during the body work. For several years, I saw a psychotherapist

every week while continuing with my Alexander lessons.

Some years later, I trained with Fritz and Laura Perls, the founders of Gestalt Therapy, who encouraged me to integrate therapy with my familiar body/mind work. Like my previous psychoanalysis, Gestalt Therapy had provided the skills to process the stored emotions often released during an Alexander lesson.

Another component of Gestalt Synergy emerged in 1971 when I met Moshe Feldenkrais, whose work in body awareness and movement is recognized as a unique advance in the field of body-mind-environment integration. I studied and trained with Feldenkrais learning his two-part technique: functional integration — one-to-one guidance through touch — and awareness-thru-movement, a system of exercises, gentle body movements, both designed to reorganize the body's muscular, skeletal, and nervous system.

My training in body/mind work and touch and psychotherapy helped me to produce my new therapeutic form, Gestalt Synergy. This synergy does not treat the individual in terms of a series of structural and postural changes. Rather, it includes the realms of emotions, thinking, body structure, spatial concepts, and movement. It treats the individual as a whole, working with both body and emotions, integrating the physical, intellectual and emotional

aspects of the person. In 1977 I inaugurated Gestalt Synergy's first intensive training programs, running concurrently in New York City and California.

TECHNIQUE

The “listening and open hand,” a skill that takes two to three years to develop, provides the Gestalt synergist with feedback. Through touch, the synergist feels what is occurring in the client's body — identifying blocks and tensions. Nonverbally, the synergist “listens” to the client. A client may claim to be relaxed; by touching, the synergist recognizes whether or not this is true and can share this with the client.

Soft and strong touch establishes the relationship between synergist and client, and through its gentleness and responsiveness builds trust between them. The synergist responds through touch to the client's consent to change, and guides the client through bodily/emotional resistances — opening locked joints, releasing tense muscles, lengthening a compressed and shortened spine. Although it may appear that the synergist is doing something to the client, it is the client who initiates and allows the release. The touch guides and teaches the client to master his own body.

Communicating with the “listening and open hand” makes special demands on the synergist. In addition to being intellectually and emotionally aware (as in verbal therapy), the synergist must also be sensitive to and

aware of physical processes. The synergist pays close attention to breathing patterns, while maintaining a dynamic, well-balanced body. Much of the training in Gestalt Synergy is devoted to developing this body/mind awareness.

The Gestalt synergist guides the client in developing body/mind awareness. For this purpose, the Feldenkrais exercises — a sequence of gentle body movements — are used. With body awareness, the client can develop the ability to “inhibit” destructive movement and consciously choose a new movement pattern. This technique, says Feldenkrais, “leads to the creation of new habits, redirecting the brain’s habitual patterns of response to movement in the gravitational field, using more natural and efficient paths for mobility and deployment of body energy.”

Following is an example of a Feldenkrais sequence: The synergist may begin a group or one-to-one session by having the clients lie on their backs. This position allows the person to experience the maximum degree of tension release in relationship to gravity. Next, the clients are asked to notice where and how various parts of the body touch the floor (or surface area). After this initial inventory, the synergist leads the clients through a sequence of movements. Throughout the sequence, the synergist asks them to pay attention to what they are experiencing in their bodies as they move, to notice what is happening to their backs, spine, head and neck muscles, ribs, pelvis,

etc., and to the way they breathe. One feature of this technique is the absence of drill. Students are instructed to go only as far as is comfortable, not to make the extra try to reach a given position. Each movement sequence includes before-and-after comparisons of the body's position. By consciously making this comparison, the brain registers the change, informing the student whether or not change has occurred. The student may discover he can now maintain and move in a position that formerly he thought was impossible.

Students also learn dynamic postural balance and structural body alignment in relationship to gravity. For structural change to occur, however, students must first become kinesthetically aware. Through touch and movement, one develops a kinesthetic awareness so that eventually, a student can think and imagine a part of the body without moving or touching it. By becoming kinesthetically aware, students develop the ability to consciously control their movements. This, in turn, leads to structural and postural change. By first becoming aware of what you are doing, and then leaving yourself alone, suspending judgment, you can imagine other possibilities. This ability is very useful not only for learning new ways of moving, but for changing other habit patterns.

The Gestalt synergist uses Gestalt and other therapeutic techniques to work through the emotional material often released during the body work. Several of the techniques used are: dramatization and role playing; fantasy

and imagination; classical “open chair” work: negative and positive accommodation (Albert and Diane Pessó’s Psychomotor technique); exaggerating movement, posture, and sound; and rewriting one’s life script confirming it both during therapy and in daily life. In addition to private one-to-one sessions, the synergist often uses a group setting to help process emotional material.

A Gestalt synergist may begin an intensive workshop “warming up” the group by leading them through a sequence of body/mind experiments. Then the group may begin a Feldenkrais movement sequence that often leaves the workshop participants feeling more alert, “softer,” breathing more deeply and fully, and more conscious of their bodies and feelings in the here-and-now. The Gestalt synergist may invite an individual to work. This one-to-one session may begin verbally and lead into body work, or begin with touch and lead into verbal processing. The synergist asks the group to participate in the one-to-one session by paying close attention. Not only does the presence of the other group members facilitate the one-to-one work, but the individual working, in turn, may encourage self-reflection on the part of the group members. The individual sessions often touch on such universal themes as death, grief, loss, separation, joy, and these can awaken sympathetic and constructive responses in the workshop participants.

APPLICATIONS

Gestalt Synergy is appropriate for those interested in coordinating their physical and emotional development. Clients may approach the Gestalt synergist with either physical or emotional concern. As a result of their Gestalt Synergy experience, psychiatrists and psychologists have indicated an increased sensitivity to their patients, and athletes have enhanced their performance. Physical and emotional needs are addressed through a variety of intra- and interpersonal processes.

In essence, the Gestalt Synergy experience is an intimate dialogue. Both synergist and client bring their total selves to the therapeutic encounter, transforming it into a collaborative effort that fosters acceptance, caring, humor, and mutual growth.