

# **Gestalt Psychotherapy (GP): organization, concepts and methods**

Gestalt Psychotherapy (from the German word *gestalt* = “figure”) originated in the 70s from the work of Frederick (Fritz) Perls, a German psychoanalyst with Jewish roots.

Due to the ups and downs of his life, to some therapies he undertook with non-orthodox psychoanalysts such as Karen Horney and Wilhelm Reich, and to an unresolved conflict with authority as well, Perls succeeded in breaking the rigid patterns of the orthodox Freudianism so that he experimented and spread a new therapy, which he named “concentration therapy”.

Resorting to various sources, including theatrical and Zen meditation techniques, Perls put in action a process of creative synthesis, in agreement with the emergent culture (“beat generation” period, rise of Humanistic Psychology), aimed to the awakening of freedom and individual creativity, and opposed to the mechanistic worldview, including mainly Psychoanalysis and Behaviorism; he managed to create a holistic therapeutic system, which looked at the person as a body-mind unity, and felt the need to retrieve the so often neglected bodily experience as a fundamental component in psychotherapy and in life.

GP should not be confused with Gestalt Psychology (a current operating within Experimental Psychology, which devoted itself particularly to the psychology of perceptive phenomena), even though the former has been influenced by the latter through the contributions of Laura Perls, Fritz’s wife and major scholar in this branch. GP is a phenomenological approach to the study of mind, since it restricts itself to the observation of the contents flow instead of interpreting them; this is why it is said that it draws its attention on the “how” rather than on the “why”. What is interesting, mainly for psychotherapy, is the personal reaction to an object rather than the mental object itself; for example, one has not to dwell upon the explanation of the reason why a person has been left by another one, but on what that person feels and on the meaning she is assigning to that event. Starting from the phenomenon, one has to step back; the phenomenon and its action spectrum are amplified, acted and revised within a work reconnecting the past history to the present one; then, the person is helped to live again the experience and to find by herself (without giving her any predefined interpretation) its proper meaning and a creative adaptation.

Within GP, *resistances* are considered in adaptive terms, not as elements to be pulled down or analyzed, but rather as protections the person has built during time in order to adapt herself and survive in a world perceived as difficult; those resistances, in most cases, have become obsolete and for this reason they gave rise to symptoms and discomforts of various kinds (anxiety, depression, etc.). Therefore, the therapeutic work aims to a restructuring of the defences in order to obtain a creative adaptation to the person’s present environment.

One of the objectives of a Gestalt psychotherapy consists in the patient’s letting flow of his energy in those points it has been blocked, in order to favour the vital process of figure/ground cycle. A *gestalt* (a figure) is a complex of sensations, feelings and cognitions which rise within the awareness continuum starting from a fertile ground. For instance: I stay at a party and I do not feel well; if I am able to observe my sensations, emotions, thoughts, I will realize that my discomfort springs from an argument I had with a colleague during the morning; my *gestalt* stands still in the ground and, since it has not been solved yet, it pushes to rise as a figure. If I keep in touch with my sensations, emotions, thoughts and needs (and if I am not conditioned by old ways of acting), I will be able to decide whether staying at the party or go away for a while to come back after calling my colleague and having an explanation with him, so as to give the argument a satisfying conclusion. The result will be a sense of satisfaction, completeness and reconciliation, apart from the chance of spending a pleasant evening.

Another peculiar characteristic of GP is the concept of aggressiveness intended in the sense of the term *ad-gredere*, which means “going towards”, in order to find the resources requested to satisfy the needs, to “chew” the experience and then to “digest it”, instead of “swallowing it” whole; instead of assenting in an uncritical way to commands and expectations introjected (swallowed) from family, institutions, culture, it is important to become aware of such contents and to assimilate them (make them similar to) through a personal processing, discarding the parts regarded as unnecessary. This sets the person more lively and gives her a better sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and more responsibility as well, that is the ability of respond of oneself autonomously.

The ability of differentiating what is assimilable to oneself, one’s field of life and action, from what is different from oneself, sets the possibility of experiencing a contact with the outer world that is full, vibrant and satisfactory, with manifest consequences on health, both bodily and mental, in terms of mood and chance to take part in life. Joseph Zinker, one of Perls’s disciples, expresses the contact process by the metaphor of the *contact cycle*, that represents the way by which the fulfilment of needs takes place. The following are the steps which have to be passed through in order to attain a satisfactory contact: 1) a phase of *pre-contact* or *withdrawal*, in which the need has not yet risen from the ground; 2) a phase of *sensation*, in which the need starts to rise and is experienced as sensation; 3) a phase of *awareness*, in which one becomes aware of the need, expressed in the sensation; 4) a phase of *mobilization* of energy needed for the accomplishment of the 5) *action* (or actions) necessary to the fulfilment of the need or 6) phase of the *full contact*, followed by a 7) phase of *post-contact*, in which one enjoys the benefits of the contact. Eventually, a phase of rest and readiness for a new contact cycle follows. The model of the contact cycle applies not only to the fulfilment of needs, but also to every experience of contact, that is to every experience, since this implies always the contact between the self and the other different from self.