

The awareness continuum

The awareness continuum relates to every aspect of gestalt therapy. The aim of gestalt is awareness, which is being in contact with one's existence and with *what is* at this moment in time. Implicit within this aim is the freeing of blocks that inhibit the flow between figure and ground experience. We can probably all relate to getting fixated to some degree on one particular problem that may cloud our awareness of our ability to process problems. A particularly distressing example of such a block can be seen in a person who is experiencing anxiety attacks. They may become figure-bound to their anxiety. It dominates their thoughts and grows into a powerful, all-consuming figure condemning the ground of their history of being able to successfully creatively adjust to situations to the shadows of unawareness³. However, the flow between figure and ground can meet with a blockage upstream or downstream. Someone with obsessive traits may be paralysed by the multiple choices that present in the ground of their experience and projected imaginings of the future, resulting in an inability to form sharp figures in the here and now. Similarly, it is easy to get lost in the ordinary rush of daily life with its various demands and plethora of messages about how we should be in the world. As a consequence awareness of our desires and aspirations can get buried under a mountain of externally imposed shoulds.

The aim of Gestalt therapy is the Awareness Continuum; the freely ongoing Gestalt formation, where what is of greatest concern and interest to the organism, the relationship, the group or society becomes Gestalt, comes into the foreground where it can be fully experienced and coped with . . . so that then it can melt into the background . . . and leave the foreground free for the next relevant Gestalt.

(L. Perls, 1973: 2)

³ In gestalt we view anxiety as excitement that has insufficient support.

One end of this continuum awareness takes the form of highly attuned sensing or intuition where you feel in full contact with your environment. There is a brightness and spontaneity in moment-to-moment experience. The opposite end of the awareness continuum can be seen in those activities that do not require heightened awareness such as our ability to hold our muscles with sufficient tension through proprioception or during sleep where there is a clear need for lower levels of awareness. It is important that we do not put a value upon a certain level of awareness without consideration to the situation faced. Whilst the aim of gestalt is to extend the client's awareness continuum it is both unrealistic and undesirable for anyone to live in a constant state of heightened awareness – peak experiences need duller experiences to exist. Awareness can be vivid, muted, automatic, spontaneous, rigid, limited, blocked or interrupted and all can be useful or harmful ways of being depending on the situation. A mother may forget herself when caring for an infant. It is when that mother's children are adults and she continues to block her awareness of her own needs that it becomes a problematic fixed gestalt.

To practise gestalt therapy effectively we need to view the focus on awareness beyond a one-person process and see its emergence, subduing or denial within a relational matrix that includes what is happening *between* the client and the therapist (Yontef, 2002). If we only concentrate on the awareness continuum of the client we dismiss one relational pole. Our task as therapists lies not only with raising a clients awareness of how he is impacted by his world, but also in facilitating awareness of how his world is impacted by him *and* the process *between* him and his world. Such facilitation can be achieved through carefully considered, well-graded self-disclosure by the therapist.

There is a distinct tendency in the gestalt literature when discussing awareness to place a heavier emphasis upon sensory and bodily experience with comparatively few references to cognitive awareness (Fodor, 1998). This may represent the remnants of gestalt's rebellion against the form of psychoanalysis practised at the time of gestalt's birth. My view is that awareness is awareness whether it is cognitive, sensory, spiritual or linguistic and that a fully embodied awareness requires an integration of all modes of experiencing. We will all have our 'awareness strengths' as well as

our areas for development (what we term in gestalt *growing edges*). We need to meet the client where s/he is with interest and excitement in discovering how they contact their world and with awareness of how they impact us.

Without awareness there is nothing, not even knowledge of nothingness.

(F. Perls, 1992: 31)