

Gestalt Therapy Quick Reference Card

A Clinical Guide for Trauma-Informed Practice

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The Four Pillars of Gestalt Therapy

Pillar	Description	Key Points
Phenomenology	Focus on the here and now - the immediate experience of the client	Immediate experience holds greater authority than analysis; Describing feelings rather than interpreting them
Dialogical Relationship	The I-Thou relationship (Buber, 1923) - therapist brings their whole self to the encounter	Therapist as authentic presence; Yontef's five qualities: inclusion, presence, commitment to dialogue, non-exploitation, living the relationship
Field Theory	Understanding the person in context of their environment and relationships	Three fields: experiential, relational, wider; Person cannot be understood in isolation
Experimentation	Action-based exercises that heighten awareness through doing, not just talking	Trying new behaviors in safety; Experiential rather than purely cognitive

Key Techniques

Empty Chair Technique

Purpose: Dialogue with an absent person or part of self represented by an empty chair

How it works: The client speaks to an empty chair as if someone (or a part of themselves) were sitting there. They may then switch chairs to respond from that perspective. This brings unfinished business into the present moment.

Uses: Resolving unfinished business, Processing grief, Addressing unexpressed emotions, Integrating disowned parts of self

Session Language: *“What would you like to say to them right now?”*

Two-Chair Work

Purpose: Dialogue between conflicting parts of self (topdog vs underdog)

How it works: The client moves between two chairs, giving voice to different parts of themselves in conflict. One chair might represent the ‘critic’ (topdog), the other the ‘criticized’ (underdog). This externalizes internal conflicts.

Uses: Resolving internal conflicts, Integrating polarities, Decision-making, Self-compassion work

Session Language: *“What does that critical part of you want to say?”*

Exaggeration Technique

Purpose: Amplifying gestures, movements, or tone to heighten awareness

How it works: When the therapist notices a gesture, posture, or tone of voice, they invite the client to exaggerate it. This amplification brings unconscious material into awareness.

Session Language: *“Can you make that gesture bigger? What do you notice?”*

Staying With the Feeling

Purpose: Remaining present with uncomfortable emotions rather than avoiding them

How it works: Rather than moving away from difficult feelings, the client is encouraged to stay with them, breathe into them, and allow them to be fully experienced.

Session Language: *“Stay with that feeling. What happens when you don’t move away from it?”*

Body Awareness

Purpose: Attention to physical sensations, posture, and breathing

How it works: The therapist draws attention to what is happening in the client’s body - tension, breathing patterns, posture, movements.

Session Language: *“What do you notice in your body right now?”*

‘I’ Statements

Purpose: Taking ownership of experience through language

How it works: Clients are encouraged to use ‘I’ statements rather than ‘you’ or ‘it’ statements. This promotes personal responsibility.

Session Language: *“Can you say that again starting with ‘I’?”*

Contact Interruptions (Boundary Disturbances)

Contact interruptions are habitual mechanisms that block the natural Cycle of Experience, preventing full contact with oneself or the environment. Originally viewed as pathological, these “modifications to contact” are now understood as creative adjustments used for protection — they become problematic only when rigid, chronic, and inflexible.

Interruption	Definition	Cycle Phase Blocked	Therapeutic Approach
Deflection	Avoiding direct contact by changing the subject, using humor, or intellectualizing	Contact	Gently redirect to present experience
Introjection	Swallowing beliefs, values, or rules from others without critically examining them	Awareness	Help client “chew” introjected material
Projection	Attributing one’s own feelings, impulses, or desires to someone else	Mobilization	Invite ownership: “Could that also be true of you?”
Retroflection	Doing to oneself what one would like to do to others, or doing for oneself what one wants from others	Action	Notice self-directed energy; explore outward expression
Confluence	Blurring of the boundary between self and other; merging of feelings and needs	Sensation	Support differentiation and boundary awareness
Desensitization	Diminishing or numbing emotional and sensory responsiveness to stimuli	Sensation	Gradual re-engagement with sensation; titrated awareness
Egotism	Excessive self-monitoring that prevents spontaneous contact; standing outside one’s own experience	Satisfaction/Withdrawal	Invite letting go of commentary; experiment with spontaneity

Session Language by Category

Awareness & Present Moment

- “What are you aware of right now?”
- “What do you notice in this moment?”
- “Where does your attention go?”
- “What is figural for you right now?”
- “Stay here with me in this moment.”

Body & Sensation

- “What do you notice in your body?”
- “Where do you feel that in your body?”
- “What is your body telling you?”
- “Can you breathe into that sensation?”
- “What happens when you stay with that feeling?”

Contact & Relationship

- “How is it for you to be here with me right now?”
- “What do you need from me in this moment?”
- “I notice you looking away - what’s happening?”
- “Can you look at me and say that?”
- “What would you like to say to them?”

Experimentation & Action

- “Would you be willing to try something?”
- “Can you exaggerate that gesture?”
- “Say that again, louder.”
- “What happens if you let yourself do that?”

- “Switch chairs and respond from that part.”

Responsibility & Ownership

- “Can you own that statement?”
 - “Say ‘I choose to’ instead of ‘I have to’”
 - “What is your part in this?”
 - “How do you stop yourself?”
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Gestalt Experiments

Experiments are not tasks—their point is not to get them done. They exist to provide present information about the client and to heighten awareness.

Awareness & Present Moment

- “What are you aware of right now in your body?”
- “Scan your body and say, ‘Right now I am aware of...’”
- “Look around and describe in detail everything you are seeing, hearing, and sensing now.”

Body & Sensation

- “Where do you feel that in your body?”
- “If that part of you had a voice, what would it say now?”
- “What does your body need right now?”
- “Would you be willing to exaggerate that gesture and see what happens?”

Boundaries & Space

- “Stand up and move away, leaving about 15 feet between us. Begin slowly walking toward me while paying attention to your internal experience. Find the distance where you feel most comfortable.”

- “As I walk toward you, say ‘Stop!’ when you need to. Notice what happens in your body.”

Emotional Expression

- “How do you stop yourself from expressing anger?”
- “If you weren’t laughing, how else might you express your feelings right now?”
- “Would you be willing to exaggerate that emotion, raise your voice, and stand up?”

Language & Ownership

- “What is it like when you change ‘I have to...’ to ‘I choose to...’?”
- “What is it like to say ‘won’t’ in place of ‘can’t’?”
- “Is there a statement behind your question?”

Source: Adapted from 101 Trauma-Informed Interventions by Linda Curran, Premier Publishing & Media, 2013

Complex Trauma Modifications

Pacing the Here-and-Now

The Gestalt emphasis on present-moment experience can be overwhelming for trauma survivors. Titrate exposure to intense affect.

- Brief contact with feelings, then grounding
- Use “experiments” with clear boundaries
- Honor client’s pace over technique

Modified Empty Chair Work

Classic empty chair can be destabilizing for complex trauma. Modify to maintain safety while accessing unfinished business.

- Start with “imaginal” rather than enacted dialogue
- Allow client to stay in their own chair
- Use protective figures or allies in the work

Contact Interruptions as Survival

In Gestalt, contact interruptions are often seen as blocks to growth. With trauma survivors, these same patterns were **survival adaptations**. Honor them before exploring change.

Reframe as Wisdom:

- Retroflection protected from dangerous expression
- Deflection maintained needed distance
- Confluence ensured attachment survival
- Desensitization prevented overwhelm

The Paradoxical Theory of Change

“Change occurs when one becomes what they are, not when they try to become what they are not.” — Arnold Beisser, MD (1970)

With complex trauma, help clients fully accept their protective patterns before inviting new possibilities.

Core Concepts Quick Reference

Term	Definition
Gestalt	German word meaning ‘whole’ or ‘pattern’; perceiving things as organized wholes rather than isolated parts
Here and Now	The present moment; Gestalt’s focus on immediate experience rather than past or future
Unfinished Business	Unexpressed emotions and incomplete experiences from the past that continue to affect present functioning
Figure-Ground	What emerges as important (figure) against the background of experience (ground)
Cycle of Experience	The natural flow of need-fulfillment: Sensation → Awareness → Mobilization → Action → Contact → Satisfaction → Withdrawal → Fertile Void
Topdog/Underdog	Internal conflict between the critical, demanding part (topdog) and the resistant, excuse-making part (underdog)
Paradoxical Theory of Change	Change occurs when one becomes what they are, not when they try to become what they are not

Buber’s I-Thou: The Dialogical Foundation

Martin Buber (1878–1965) published *Ich und Du* (I and Thou) in 1923. Laura Perls studied directly under Buber in Frankfurt and wove his philosophy into the DNA of Gestalt therapy.

I-Thou (Ich-Du)	I-It (Ich-Es)
Present-moment encounter between whole subjects	Detached, objectifying stance for observation and analysis
Mutual, pre-reflective engagement	One-directional, instrumental relating
Both persons are changed by the encounter	The other is categorized, measured, used
Fleeting — cannot be manufactured or sustained	Stable, necessary for clinical reflection

Yontef's Five Characteristics of Dialogue: Inclusion (empathic attunement), Presence (therapist's authentic self), Commitment to Dialogue (prioritizing the between), Non-Exploitation (no hidden agenda), Living the Relationship (ongoing, not technique-bound).

Clinical implication: The therapist oscillates between I-Thou presence and I-It reflection. The healing power lies in sustaining an I-Thou attitude even when the client cannot yet reciprocate (Mann, 2010).

Cycle of Experience

The Gestalt Cycle of Experience describes the natural flow of need-fulfillment through eight stages:

Stage	Description
1. Sensation	Something registers in the organism — a bodily signal, environmental stimulus
2. Awareness	The sensation becomes figural — the person recognizes what they are experiencing
3. Mobilization	Energy builds to act on the awareness — desire, intention, readiness
4. Action	The person reaches out toward the environment to meet the need
5. Contact	Full engagement with the object of need — the peak of the cycle
6. Satisfaction	The need is met; the organism registers fulfillment
7. Withdrawal	The completed experience recedes; energy returns to baseline
8. Fertile Void	Open, receptive pause before the next sensation emerges

When this cycle flows unimpeded, needs are met and the organism returns to equilibrium. Contact interruptions block specific phases, creating “unfinished business.”

Founders & Historical Context

Fritz Perls & Laura Perls with Paul Goodman developed Gestalt therapy in the 1940s-1950s.

Foundational Text: *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951)

Philosophical Influences:

- Existential philosophy (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre)
 - Martin Buber’s I-Thou philosophy (Laura Perls studied under Buber in Frankfurt)
 - Eastern philosophies (Zen Buddhism, Taoism)
 - Kurt Lewin’s Field Theory
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Professional Organizations

- **Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT)** - www.aagt.org
 - **Gestalt International Study Center** - www.gisc.org
 - **New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy** - www.newyorkgestalt.org
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This quick reference card is intended as a clinical aid and does not replace comprehensive training in Gestalt therapy. For complex trauma work, additional specialized training is recommended.

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