process of perceptions being shaped by unaware, habitual responses to needs and desires. The process of perception is filtered by one's own subjectivity, which blocks capacities to see differently and respond adaptively. Awareness is central to Gestalt theory and practice, and is applied and prompted by Gestalt practitioners in multiple ways. To better understand awareness, we first start with how it is captured in the concept of figure/ground, which influences perception.

**Figure/Ground: Perception and Change**

The Gestalt concept of figure/ground is the core element of awareness work. The figure/ground perceptual process is a natural human activity, and refers to what we pay attention to and how we respond to what we see. While figure/ground is basically understood as a visual phenomenon, it is also a psychological phenomenon in Gestalt. What we pay attention to—the "figure of interest"—among all other available things in the environment—what is referred to as "ground"—will focus our awareness and will influence the meaning we make of that figure and the actions we take in response to it.

For example: I’m presenting a major project proposal in a meeting. As I’m about to speak, my cellphone hums with a text message from my home security company about a possible security breach—I have to respond to that call quickly. Within the span of a few minutes, I need to let the meeting facilitator know that I have to step out, I have to call the security company and report in, and I then need to return to the meeting and give the presentation. My presentation is a very important figure of interest to me—it has dominated my time and energy for months. At the same time, this security breach at home has suddenly and unexpectedly become a new figure of interest that I can’t ignore. My psychological work, then, is to shift between my long-term figure of interest (the presentation) and my in-the-moment figure of interest (the security figures). The best outcome is that I feel a sense of relief in gestalt practice, multiple figures of interest are continually shifting, making the management of awareness, the growing interest in the presentation... on purpose, in this way, to be aware of the interest is known to demonstrates that we have available figures. The ability to do in a form of "bracketing." The genius of Fritz Perls in the mid-20th century and motivation: our also ultimately determines how we then respond to the meeting and give the presentation. My presentation is a very important figure of interest to me—it has dominated my time and energy for months. At the same time, this security breach at home has suddenly and unexpectedly become a new figure of interest that I can’t ignore. My psychological work, then, is to shift between my long-term figure of interest (the presentation) and my in-the-moment figure of interest (the security figures). The best outcome is that I feel a sense of relief.
of interest (the security breach). I need to effectively manage both figures. The best outcome? I call the security company and resolve the issue quickly and satisfactorily, and I return and deliver my presentation, fully focused and present. In that ideal scenario, I feel a sense of relief and completion.

In Gestalt practice, whether as coach or as client, managing multiple figures of interest is an important skill to master. Our continually shifting local and global environments create a kind of figure frenzy, making it difficult to know what to pay attention to and challenging to be grounded and focused. In its emphasis on managing awareness, Gestalt practice is thoroughly aligned with the growing interest in mindfulness, best defined as “paying attention . . . on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

To be aware of and to navigate between competing figures of interest is known as figure/ground reversal, and that capacity demonstrates that we can choose how we will respond to multiple figures. The ability to manage multiple or competing figures requires a form of “bracketing,” which takes discipline and personal mastery. The genius of Fritz Perls, originator of Gestalt psychotherapy in the mid-20th century, was to identify the link between perception and motivation: our needs and desires not only motivate us, but also ultimately determine what we are able to see in our world and how we then respond to what we are able to see. So in Gestalt practice, the first substantive question for our clients (and ourselves as coaches) is: “What are you aware of that holds your attention?” The second substantive question of Gestalt practice is: “Are you ever aware of what you are not aware of?” The idea of becoming aware of what one is not aware of may sound paradoxical, but this may be the crucial awareness that could change both your perceptions of the world and your responses to the world. We tend to be quite good at “keep[ing] out of our own awareness what we do not want to know. By doing so we deceive ourselves and protect
ourselves at the same time.” In Chapter 2, we will expand on how habitual, unaware patterns result in reduced awareness and therefore reduced choices.

The role of awareness in our physical or psychological environments is usually not obvious to us. Instead, we function economically through habitual, virtually invisible processes, which usually are functional and serve personal efficiency. Certain activities and behaviors become routine and no longer require our attention or energy (personal habits like putting your car keys in a designated spot, for example, or customary habits like shaking hands with people you’re just meeting). Sometimes, though, we’re unable to see that a change has occurred in our environment that requires a different response from us; or we sense that there’s been a change, but we can’t articulate just what it is or what response it calls for. Sometimes, what has become our habitual process also limits our ability to function effectively or to respond well to new situations. For example: The organizational leader who keeps doing “business as usual,” despite environmental demands for technological changes, is probably headed for obsolescence. Obsolescence has to do with the inability to see and adapt to unexpected possibilities emerging in our field of activity. The person who has prepared extensively for an important presentation but can’t convincingly answer an unanticipated yet relevant question “in the moment” will inevitably feel diminished and regretful. So another core question of Gestalt practice is: “Are you aware of the figures that need your attention?” Recent work by Otto Scharmer speaks to the relevance of being able to respond to emerging new figures in the moment that test our capacity to be adaptive. This capacity to pay attention to what is emerging requires combining a nonjudgmental attitude with a curiosity to open oneself to what is new or different, which holds an element of wonder. “Without the capacity for wonder, we will most likely remain stuck in the p...
likely remain stuck in the prison of our mental constructs.” The capacity to pay attention is critical to learning, as it is linked to the critical strength embedded in resilience, which is adaptability. An emerging understanding of adaptability is being able to recognize and discern figures as they emerge from the ground of our experience. This idea of ground in relation to figure is also what gives meaning to the concept of awareness.

Gestalt’s figure/ground concept is often explained through optical illusions, presented in introductory psychology classes and entertainment venues as perceptual games. Let’s look at one example, the “Columns or People” illusion (Figure 1.2).

![Columns or People](image_url)

Which do you see first and most easily? It may take a while to see that both images are there because you can’t see both images at the same time, only one image at a time. When you see the columns, the people are the shadowy background out of which the columns emerge. When you see the people, the columns are the shadowy background out of which the people emerge. To recognize that both
images exist simultaneously in the field, you need to consciously and willfully shift your visual attention.

What is important in terms of Gestalt practice is that once you are aware that two images are available to you, then you have the capacity to choose where to focus your attention. The premise of all such illusions is deceptively simple but serves an important teaching point: What we’re not aware of—whether objects or people, viewpoints or perspectives—may be the very figures that we need to be aware of, as they give us lively new perceptual possibilities, new cognitive interpretations, and new behavioral responses. The mindfulness of Gestalt practice is learning to be aware of one’s awareness, which involves internal states of thoughts and feelings as well as the external states of one’s environment.

The power of awareness was captured by the concept of the paradoxical theory of change, developed by Arnold Beisser in 1970 in a now classic essay (the theory is discussed more fully in Chapter 2). Beisser wrote the paper intending to clarify Fritz Perls’s somewhat indistinct ideas about how Gestalt theory and practice understands change for patients/clients. Beisser summarizes the paradox of change this way: “Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not.” Like all paradoxes, the statement seems contradictory at first, but it reveals an essential truth from a Gestalt perspective, and captures what many experience as a surprising mystery that is only revealed when “seen” with awareness. When people shun aspects of their self-definition (their identity), whether purposefully or without awareness, they experience “inner conflict” and are unable to engage with the motivating energy and emotional openness that are necessary for change to occur. For example, surveys and inquiries reveal that many people, after years of hard work, are dissatisfied—they were never optimally aligned with their career choice. But when people are able to embrace who they are “right now,” with acceptance and self-awareness, no matter the psychological integrity and re emerging opportunities for present-state phenomenon or past or the anticipation of choice, in the moment, the power of the Gestalt approach is famous for creating a greater well-being, which ignited the spa industry. As the story of weight loss camp for his wife to tell her, “Come with the rest of our lives,” awareness and capacity to being, which he had always his disowned concern for his entrepreneurial business skills learned early in his capacity to live in a body and purpose. The issue for growth—is how to awake an awareness of new poss what was to what can be.

The Gestalt approach for self-regulation and self-forms of intelligence. W mastery is advanced through one’s awareness. We identify Awareness IQ, which is hearing, touch, taste, smell as well as the ability to intel
ed to consciously practice is that once you have it, you have it. The premise serves an important purpose that we need to be aware of our thoughts and feelings.

The concept of the self as defined by Fritz Perls is further clarified. Perls’s theory and practice summarize the potential of the self when one becomes aware of their own self-definition, not just awareness, they engage with the world in a more conscious manner. 

But when people with acceptance and self-awareness, no matter their status, they experience a sense of psychological integrity and renewed energy. They are able to embrace emerging opportunities for growth and change. Awareness is a present-state phenomenon that differs from the recollection of the past or the anticipation of the future. Awareness enables the power of choice, in the moment, which is what makes the present-centered power of the Gestalt approach so compelling.

Mel Zuckerman, the visionary behind Canyon Ranch Spas, is famous for creating a groundbreaking approach to health and well-being, which ignited a revolutionary approach to the health spa industry. As the story goes: Though he had initially gone to a weight loss camp for his health, at the end of two weeks he called his wife to tell her, “Come to Tucson—I’ve found out what to do with the rest of our lives.” At the age of 50, Zuckerman had the awareness and capacity to see a new possibility for his own well-being, which he had always disowned in early life, yet at midlife his disowned concern about his well-being became the catalyst for his entrepreneurial success. He incorporated the work and business skills learned earlier into new dreams built on reclaiming his capacity to live in a healthy manner, gaining renewed energy and purpose. The issue for Zuckerman—really for all who seek growth—is how to awaken from unaware habits or habituation to an awareness of new possibilities and change: how to move from what was to what can be.

The Gestalt approach places awareness in the central role for self-regulation and self-development, and integrates multiple forms of intelligence. We propose that personal and practitioner mastery is advanced through intelligently and strategically using one’s awareness. We identify this evolutionary Gestalt process as Awareness IQ, which involves awareness across all senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell) and all modalities (head, heart, gut), as well as the ability to intelligently use that awareness information to
strategically provoke a needed action. The concept of Awareness IQ arose primarily through my own recognition (in myself and in my clients) that failure to use one’s awareness fully and astutely leads to the regret of lost opportunities. These contrast with experiences of mastery, where successful use of awareness leads to positive and, at times, magical outcomes. The story of Mel Zuckerman and Canyon Ranch is exemplary because he was willing, at the age of 50, to become fully aware of his needs and to act on that awareness to enable and realize new possibilities. When such initial awareness is compelling yet disowned or avoided, Gestalt coaches can creatively inquire of the client whether that disowning or avoidance was or will be a cause for regret.

**Process: Gaining Awareness through the Cycle of Experience and Unit of Work**

As awareness is the key phenomenon that drives Gestalt work, the Cycle of Experience (Cycle or COE) is the central theoretical model of a Gestalt approach (discussed fully in Chapter 3). It is a powerful conceptual tool to determine correspondence among awareness, resistance, choice, and responsibility for taking action. One of the early influences on Gestalt psychology and theory, Kurt Lewin, once remarked that there is nothing so practical as a good theory, and the COE is an illustration of that maxim. The COE serves foremost as an organic process model of what one is aware of about oneself and one’s environment, and how one acts on that awareness in relation to satisfying needs and wants. The COE also serves as an assessment of how need and want processes are being engaged or avoided through patterns of resistance. The optimal process of the COE starts with sensation, which gets recognized as a figure of awareness, which causes emotion that generates action, which is satisfied by contact and assimilated through closure. This seemingly simple sequence has profound diversity and depth. The Gestalt practitioner’s identification of their client’s agenda and energetic sense that they have not been are then able to make...

**Figure 1.3 Cycle of Experience**

The conceptual (UOW), a four-step erate—that is, “int