The here and now

In gestalt therapy we centre on here and now moments of experience. This is not to deny that experience has its roots in the past, or to ignore the existence of hopes and fears for the future, but these are experienced in the present moment. We focus on immediate experience and in doing so concentrate on what and how the client perceives their situation now, rather than digging around in an attempt to discover why they might perceive their situation this way. We believe that it is through heightened awareness of the way each individual selects and forms their figures of interest from the ground of their experience in the present moment that growth is achieved.

Gestalt’s focus on the ‘here and now’ was borne out of Perls’s criticism of Freud’s archaeological approach to therapy. Perls asserted that, ‘there is no other reality than the present’ (1947: 208) and in collaboration with the co-founders of gestalt therapy, he developed a brilliant explication of the here and now moment at a time when almost all around were concentrating on the archaic.

In health the most pressing and relevant need emerges from the plethora of possibilities available to us. These figures flow one to another, emerge and recede from the ground of our experience. This process of choice takes place in the present and it is what is selected and how it is chosen that is of particular interest to gestalt therapists. Facilitating a client to explore their moment-to-moment awareness in the here and now can provide a platform for them to consider their motivation for making such choices, and provide an opportunity to reassess whether this motivation fits with their here and now situation. Behaviour in the present may reflect a behaviour that is causing the client problems in their wider field due to an outdated creative adjustment. A client who struggles to decide where to sit in the therapy room may be encountering difficulties in making decisions ‘where to be’ in their world, alternatively they may feel under scrutiny in therapy which may mirror past experiences. In this sense gestalt therapy can be
seen as a microcosm of the client's everyday life and part of that microcosm will be the therapist's here and now reactions.

It is not the gestalt therapist's task to interpret or explain the client's behaviour, to do so would be to move away from the immediacy of the present. Indeed, part of the therapeutic task in gestalt is to focus on immediate awareness, to notice the subtle ways in which direct relating may be sidestepped through 'talking about' in the past tense. The therapist also needs to bring the full impact of their own personhood and be fully prepared to meet the other in the present with direct, here and now language in the service of the therapeutic relationship. However, although the therapist needs to be prepared to disclose the impact the client is having on them, here and now relating is not an excuse for indiscriminate self-disclosure. Any self-disclosure needs to be in the service of the therapeutic relationship.

I would like to invite the reader to take part in a simple experiment that I hope will demonstrate the ever-changing nature of our present experience across different modes of experiencing. Ideally, complete this exercise with a partner; if this is not possible you can adapt it to complete it alone, although interpersonal contact will increase the impact.

Face your partner and try to maintain eye contact. Check that you are well supported by your environment; that you are sitting in a supportive way, that your breathing is regular and relaxed. Complete the following three sentences several times alternating with your partner: I see . . . I feel . . . I imagine . . . For example, I see that you have blue eyes, I feel sad and I imagine that you are embarrassed. Your partner then shares their experience in the same way. Note whether you are tempted to rehearse what you are going to say thereby moving away from your here-and-now experience. Pay attention to the accuracy of each statement, e.g. When saying, 'I see . . .' check that you are sharing something that you can actually see, with the 'I feel . . . ' statement ensure that you are reporting a feeling state.

Our perception of the here and now is only possible as we encounter change and difference. We need a background of the past to frame a foreground of the present for an event to make sense. For example, if you have air, yet this experience of Fish do not kn...

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MAPS FOR A GESTALT THERAPY JOURNEY

... the present is not shut up in itself, but transcends towards a future and a past.

(Merleau-Ponty 1962: 421)