3 · Awareness

Awareness is like the glow of a coal, which comes from its own combustion; what is given by introspection is like the light reflected from an object when a flashlight is turned on it. (Perls et al., 1989 [1951]: 75)

The promotion and encouragement of full and free-flowing awareness is the cornerstone of Gestalt practice. However, there are many different meanings to ‘awareness’. It is sometimes used negatively to refer to being ‘self-conscious’ (as in embarrassment) or to introspection (as in over-analysing oneself). These meanings miss the mark, for in Gestalt, awareness is not about thinking, reflecting or self-monitoring.

Awareness is a form of experience which can be loosely defined as being in touch with one’s own existence, with what is . . . the person who is aware knows what he does, how he does it, that he has alternatives and that he chooses to be as he is. (Yontef, 1993: 144–5, emphasis in original)

At its best, awareness is a non-verbal sensing or knowing what is happening here and now. It is a fundamentally positive, essential quality of all healthy living. It is the energy for assimilation and growth at the contact boundary, for self-knowledge, choice and creativity. One way to understand awareness is as a continuum. At one end is sleep; your body breathes, regulates its vital functions and is ready to awaken to danger. Here, awareness is minimal and automatic. At the other end of this continuum is full self-awareness (sometimes called full contact or peak experience). You feel fully alive, exquisitely aware of being in the moment, with a sense of connection, spontaneity and freedom. Passage along this continuum will vary from day to day, moment to moment – experience at times being dull and routine, at other times being new and challenging.

The young child often seems to inhabit a world of boundless awareness and enthusiasm and has an aliveness and spontaneity that is often lost in adulthood. Most of this loss of ‘newness’ is due to fixed gestals that limit awareness, and the interference of thoughts and memories of the past or anticipations of the future. If I am completely absorbed in a task or thought and unaware of myself, I am out of contact with the environment and myself. However, if I become aware, even if I continue my train of thought, the situation has subtly changed. I am aware now that I am thinking about the then. Awareness could be said to be consciousness of
my existence, here, now, in this body. It is a Gestalt axiom that we can recapture this immediacy as adults and, in many ways, raising or heightening awareness is always the first task in Gestalt counselling and therapy.

It is important to keep remembering that awareness is both knowing and being. If I suggest to a client that he pay attention to his breathing, I am suggesting that he both ‘knows’ he is breathing and that he has the moment-to-moment ‘experience’ of breathing. It is this ongoing experience of awareness that can be enormously healing in counselling. The task of the counsellor is then to highlight or identify the way a client interrupts, restricts or has lost awareness of vital aspects of his self-functioning. The restriction or blockage of awareness often manifests itself as lack of energy and vitality, or rigidity in responsiveness. Restoration of healthy self-process comes when the behaviour or attitude is brought to awareness and re-experienced directly.

At its best, awareness is a continuous means for keeping up to date with oneself. It is an ongoing process; readily available at all times, rather than an exclusive or sporadic illumination – like insight – only at special moments or under special conditions. It is always there like an underground stream, ready to be tapped into when needed, a refreshing and revitalizing experience. Furthermore, focusing on one’s awareness keeps one absorbed in the present situation, heightening the impact of therapy experiences, as well as the more common experiences in life. (Polster and Polster, 1974: 211)

One of the most important tasks, then, of the Gestalt therapist is that of raising the awareness of the client – awareness of what he feels and thinks, how he behaves, what is going on in his body and the information of his senses; awareness of how he makes contact – of his relationships with other people, of his impact on his environment and its impact on him.

**Exploring awareness**

Simple though it may seem, perhaps the most obvious and natural way of raising awareness is for the client to tell his story to someone who herself listens with full awareness. When you consciously focus your awareness, you are ‘paying attention’ and it is this directed awareness that is the central therapeutic activity of the Gestalt counsellor. Attention can be directed tightly on a particular aspect of functioning (e.g., to breathing or a tense part of the body) or it can be directed broadly, to bring a holistic perspective (e.g., to paying attention to ways of relating). By taking our client’s thoughts and feelings seriously,
and with full attention, we invite him to do the same. By reflecting back to the client what we are hearing, by asking him how he is feeling, by exploring his belief system with him, we invite him to listen to himself and also to bring his full awareness to bear on his experience and the way he makes sense of the world. By keeping ‘horizontal’ and by paying attention to the whole field we can help our client bring in all aspects of himself, including what is habitually ignored or missing.

In the most general way, the counsellor is attempting to encourage:

- Staying in the here and now.
- Sharpening and expanding awareness of ongoing experience.
- Directing or focussing awareness to what is minimized or avoided.

Consider the following counsellor interventions:

Focus your attention on your breathing . . .

Can you sense what you are feeling right now . . .

Are you aware of what you are thinking . . .

What part of your body do you have no awareness of?

I notice that your body seems rigid and your breathing has become shallow.

The purpose of these interventions is for the client to become aware of what is out of awareness. They are not meant to change the client’s experience, but to restore or strengthen here-and-now holistic awareness. It is important also to realize that without genuine interest on the part of the counsellor, the interventions can become dry and mechanical. At heart, they need to be founded on active, ongoing curiosity.

**Example**

*Ben*: I’m not sure what to talk about this week. [looks uneasy]

*Therapist*: Take a moment to see what you are aware of as you sit here with me.

*Ben*: I’m not aware of anything.

*Therapist*: How do you feel right now?

*Ben*: Empty. [silence]

*Therapist*: Can you describe your ‘empty’ to me?
Ben: It's like I'm tense and I don't know what to do.
Therapist: How do you know you're tense?
Ben: I'm tight around my shoulders and I feel embarrassed.
Therapist: Embarrassed?
Ben: Yes. [silence]
Therapist: I'm interested in how your embarrassment feels to you.
Ben: I feel sort of shy.
Therapist: And what happens next?
Ben: I get afraid that you're criticizing me.

In this way Ben starts to focus his attention on his body process, becomes aware of his unease in relationship with the therapist and identifies his fear of criticism that interferes with relational contact.

The zones of awareness

We will now look at what Perls (1969) identified as the three zones of awareness. They are the Inner Zone, the Outer Zone and the Middle Zone. The disadvantage of this conceptualization is that it risks creating the impression of a false division between internal and external experience. Awareness is always holistic. However, as a metaphor, the zones can be very useful, both as an assessment tool for the therapist and also in helping the client to include in his awareness all aspects of himself. We will examine each in turn in order to explore their significance.

The Inner Zone

The Inner Zone of awareness refers to the internal world of the client, often imperceptible to the counsellor. It includes such subjective phenomena as visceral sensations, muscular tension or relaxation, heartbeat, and breathing, as well as the blend of bodily sensation and feeling which is known as bodily-affective states. We also locate emotions in the inner zone, (although they could arguably be part of the middle zone).

The most obvious ways of heightening awareness of the inner zone are to draw the client’s attention to his body and sensations. We may do this through questions – ‘How do you feel now?’ ‘What are you experiencing now?’ Or by commenting on what we observe, as in, ‘I notice that your breathing is shallow’, ‘Notice the tension in your leg muscles’.
Suggestion: If a client seems to be out of touch with his Inner Zone, you may wish to guide him with the following exercise:
Imagine your awareness like a searchlight, which can sweep slowly throughout your body, at your command. Pay attention slowly, taking some time, to your feet, one after the other (N.B. counsellor pauses for 5–10 seconds) . . . and legs (another 5–10 second pause) . . . your back . . . and shoulders . . . your genitals . . . and belly . . . your chest . . . your arms . . . wrists . . . and hands . . . your neck . . . head . . . eyes . . . face . . . mouth . . . Notice areas of tension and relaxation. Notice what other sensations you experience in your body. What emotional tone or feeling do you notice? Where is it located? If you feel nothing or very little, stay with that awareness, let it deepen and then repeat the exploration.

The Outer Zone

This is the awareness of contact with the outside world. It includes all our behaviour, our speech and action. It includes how we use what are called contact functions (seeing, hearing, speaking, tasting, touching, smelling and moving), which are all the ways that we receive or make contact with the world. If we pay attention to our contact functions, we can become skilled in present-moment awareness, in noticing colours, shapes, sounds, textures and so on. The world around us becomes more rich and vibrant in a way that can transform our experience. There is another reason for focussing on our outer zone, however. In order for us to be aware of our choices and to make changes in the way we behave, perhaps to get different responses from other people, we have to become aware of what we are doing and its effect on others and ourselves. We need to become skilled at noticing what is going on around us. Again, the most simple way of heightening a client’s awareness of his outer zone is to draw attention to his actions, movements or behaviour in his environment and to the stimuli of the outside world: ‘Be aware of the world around you, what are you noticing?’; ‘What can you hear?’; ‘May I give you some feedback about how you are with me?’ and so on.

Suggestion: You may wish to guide the client with the following exercise:
Move the searchlight of your awareness outside your body. Take it slowly. What can you see, hear, smell? What can you feel in terms of contact with the world around you? The chair you are sitting on, the feel of the clothes against your body. Look around and see how many colours and shapes you can identify. What sounds can you hear? Be aware of the distance you are from me, what do you notice about me? (and so on . . .)
The Middle Zone

The middle zone consists of our thinking, memories, fantasies and anticipations. It includes all the ways in which we make sense of both our internal stimuli and external stimuli. In short, it acts like a mediator or negotiator between the inner and outer. One of its major functions is to organize our experiences in order to come to some sort of cognitive and emotional understanding. Another is to predict, plan, imagine, create and make choices. It is the middle zone that includes beliefs and memories. It is, therefore, the main cause of our problems and distress, in that inevitably, it also holds our self-limiting beliefs, our fixed ways of understanding the world, and our tendency to fill the present with thoughts about the past or the future. In our middle zone we also label our experiences which inevitably determines how we feel about them.

Raising awareness of the middle zone is perhaps the most subtle. It is important not to make assumptions about what a person may be thinking or imagining. Thus we might ask - 'What are you saying to yourself about what happened?', 'What sense did you make of that?', 'And if that were true, what would it mean to you?', 'What do you think about that, or imagine, or fantasize or hope for?' and so on. Or we might say, 'It sounds as if you're saying it's not OK to do that?'

**Suggestion:** You might now ask the client to reflect on the previous awareness exercises (or any intervention you have previously made). What do you think about it? What did you make of being asked to smell your environment? What other reactions do you have? Now begin deliberately to shuttle backwards and forwards between the zones. Take it gently so that you really allow yourself to be aware of what you are feeling, thinking, seeing, imagining and so on. Notice again what is going on in your body - what do you make of that? How do you feel? What do you think that might mean? What do you notice around you - how do you respond to that?

In practice the healthy person shuttles back and forth between the zones throughout his daily life. When awareness becomes weighted in one particular zone, the effect is to unbalance functioning, with sometimes quite problematic results.

**Examples**

Molly focused excessively on the outside world, and the opinions of others; she desensitized her own feelings and judgements. In therapy, she said that she never knew what to do or even what she wanted and that she relied on someone else to make decisions for her (dominant outer zone). Hari was constantly in a state of worrying and obsessing about life (dominant middle zone) while Deanna was so overwhelmingly...
aware of her bodily-affective states, almost to the exclusion of all else, that she frequently escalated into a wordless panic which she was incapable of managing (dominant inner zone).

**Relational awareness**

The way a therapist and client relate to each other can also become a powerful vehicle in which all three zones of awareness can be investigated. The client’s moment-by-moment response to the therapist demonstrates *how* he is aware and also the ways in which he is not aware. The most important of the therapist’s tools is herself—her responses to the client and her own awareness in the here-and-now. Without attempting to explain or interpret, she can use her presence and skills of observation in the service of the client. She responds with her own reactions, commenting on how the client is being in the room, his process, the areas that he seems to ignore or minimize, and discrepancies, for example, between what he feels and what he expresses in his body. She is open to exploring the client’s reactions (and projections) to her, always with the aim of helping him become aware of his own experience.

The practitioner also needs to become skilled at monitoring and recognizing the impact of her interventions and presence. For example, there is a difference between a client who blushes from anxiety and one whose colour is raised by excitement and enthusiasm. Increasing awareness tends to create physical arousal during the process of discovery (and relaxation afterwards). It leads to expansion of body movement, changes in energy, flexibility of responses, vibrancy of attention and self-expression. The counsellor will try to be alert to these signs, so that she can sensitively follow the ebb and flow of the client’s process of awareness. Of course, as counsellors, we cannot expect ourselves to be omniscient. At any time, it is always fine to *ask* the client!

**The cycle of experience**

A traditional way of understanding the flow of awareness is through a metaphor called the ‘cycle of experience’ (also known as the cycle of awareness, the contact cycle and the cycle of the interdependency of organism and environment). It is a simple and powerful way of tracking the formation, interruption and completion of emerging figures. It identifies stages from the moment of experiencing a sensation, to recognizing and naming it, to making sense of it and deciding how to respond, to taking action, making fully aware contact with the situation, then completing and withdrawing energy ready for the next cycle.
Figure 3.1 The cycle of experience

Cycles of experience can be simple or complex. For example, a therapist realizes that the session is nearly ended, mobilizes her energy, calls the client’s attention to the ending, they say goodbye and the client leaves, the therapist then reviews the session, disengages and prepares herself for her next client. In a more complex cycle, a social worker becomes aware of a growing interest in the field of counselling. She explores training opportunities and chooses a Gestalt course. Over many years, she completes the many demanding requirements of training and eventually achieves her diploma. Satisfied, she withdraws from study party!

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A difficulty however, in using the cycle as a therapeutic tool, is that human experience is often more complicated than can easily be identified by the model. It does not allow for such complexities as the need to choose between competing figures (or cycles). On the other hand, it is excellent for tracking simple, singular experiences or figures and it can be useful as a guide to find out where a process of aware experiencing may be stuck or diverted. This is particularly true for a client whose tendency is to habitually interrupt at the same stage of the cycle. A client who is always anxious can be thought of as being habitually interrupted between mobilization and action, or a successful workaholic as interrupted between contact and satisfaction. It can help, therefore, to ask the question: which part of the sequence has been interrupted or modified? Here are some possible scenarios:

- A client who has suffered trauma or abuse may disconnect from his inner zone of bodily-affective sensation. (An interruption before sensation.)

- A person who has an eating disorder may well be interrupted at the stage of recognition of her emotions, mis-labelling her sensations as hunger rather than emotional neediness. (An interruption between sensation and recognition.)

- An anxious and agitated client has mobilized an excess of energy but is unable to take effective action. (An interruption between mobilization and action.)

- A promiscuous client takes action by constantly starting new affairs but is unable to make real relational contact. (An interruption between action and contact.)

- A workaholic may competently make contact and complete work projects, but is unable to achieve satisfaction and starts a new project straight away. (An interruption between contact and satisfaction.)

- An anxious client who is constantly fearful of death, has trouble falling asleep although he is tired. He is unable to withdraw and surrender to the unknown of sleep. (An interruption between satisfaction and withdrawal.)

- The goal-orientated businessman is always seeking out the next opportunity, unable to meditate or sit in silence, fearing the uncertainty of emptiness or the void. (An interruption between satisfaction and the void.)

All our examples are instances where we believe that it would be healthy for the client to find a way to become aware of the interrupted energy and complete the cycle of experience. However, this is not always the case. Knowing what should
follow next at any stage of the cycle is a combination of the client's awareness of his needs (and options) and your own hunches, but the client is the only one who can really know what completion means for him and how long it needs to take. Some cycles will complete in one session, some may take years. Some may be abandoned or modified by the client in favour of other directions.

Before we leave the cycle here, however, we would like to draw your attention again to its final step – one that is often neglected in the literature – the stage that occurs between withdrawal and sensation, after one has completed a cycle and before being captured by the next vibrant figure. It is sometimes known as the 'fertile void'. It is so called in order to underline the value of simply 'being there', in full awareness of self in the world. For the counsellor, it is also the place of creative indifference with a client, being alert and available without any agenda, ready to respond to the emerging figure. It is a time to be undirected and acknowledge the unknown. It can be both a surrender to the primacy of organismic self-regulation and also a surrender to the emergence of the spiritual dimension.

Existential dimensions

Human kind cannot stand very much reality. (T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*)

Human beings spend much of their time choosing to live comfortably and avoid the awareness of existential realities such as death, loneliness, isolation, uncertainty, embodiment, freedom and responsibility. In fact, many fixed Gestals are a creative adjustment to these existential givens. For example, a child loses his mother and decides never to risk being close to anyone again in order to avoid the fear of loss and pain. As an adult he continues to follow this decision. A woman submits to endless plastic surgery in order to ward off the reality of ageing and death. Another man decides never to try hard at anything because he cannot face the reality of not being perfect. Responsibility is the existential reality that is perhaps most highlighted by Gestalt therapy. As awareness grows, so does the realization that even though we are not responsible for everything that happens to us, we are indeed responsible for how we feel about it, the meaning we assign to it and how we manage it. In a very real sense, we choose our experience – even though it may not feel like that. Owning and accepting responsibility for our experience and responsibility to our community is the hallmark of mature, contact-full living.

Becoming fully aware of the reality of living in the world leads to anxiety, which existentialists believe to be the normal state of being (Cohn, 1997). This underlines the importance of ensuring that a client's level of support is sufficient before embarking on awareness work around deep existential issues (see Chapter...
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Seven on self-support). It also points to the importance of differentiating between neurotic anxiety and existential anxiety. The former is an interference to here-and-now functioning; the latter is the other side of excitement – the unfortunate but inevitable accompaniment to living fully and vibrantly in the present.

The paradoxical theory of change

We now turn to another concept central to Gestalt therapy, which is in many ways a natural extension of all that has been said above. Although described as a theory, the paradoxical theory of change stated by Beisser (1970), might be more accurately called a principle. It asserts that, 'Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not' (p. 77). The principle rests on the idea that all clients have the resources to grow and change if they allow the natural process of organismic self-regulation.

Clients often come for therapy believing that they can change according to a predetermined plan or wanting just to get rid of particular unpleasant feelings, thoughts or attitudes. They hope to be helped to achieve an idealized picture or idea of how they want to be different (for example 'to be free from anxiety' or 'to be liked by everyone'). The paradoxical theory of change maintains that, instead of working to change himself, the client needs to enter as fully as possible into all aspects of his own experience, bringing it into full awareness. Once he has done this, trusting his organismic self-regulation, change will naturally follow. The principle may be also understood when we realize that if a client can make this profound attitude of self-acceptance, then he is in fact making a radically different (and transformative) change to his normal attitude to himself. This point was made by Perls (1969) when he distinguished between self-actualization and 'self-image actualization'.

This fundamental concept is paradoxical in the sense that it implies that in order to change, the client needs to give up trying to change. It asserts instead, that there is a natural process of growth and change through ongoing awareness, contact and assimilation. The client (and counsellor) needs to be prepared, with enough self-support, to trust in organismic self-regulation and give themselves up to finding how to live more fully and authentically.

Creative indifference

The most useful attitude the counsellor can adopt to facilitate this process is one of creative indifference. This concept, which has its roots in Eastern spirituality,
similar to the practice of equanimity in Buddhism or the attitude of Castaneda’s (1975) ‘impeccable warrior’. It does not mean (contrary to what its title might suggest) an attitude of non-caring. It is based on the idea that the counsellor does not have any vested interest in any particular outcome. It is another way of facing the existential uncertainty of the unknown – not a simple task. It involves the counsellor in truly embracing the practice of genuine interest combined with an equally genuine lack of investment in any particular result. The counsellor is willing to accept whatever ‘is and becomes’. This has resonance with the spiritual influences in Gestalt such as Zen Buddhism, which advocate acceptance or surrender to ‘what is’ as a crucial necessity for spiritual growth.

This model of growth is easy to see in the physical world where a gardener provides the right conditions of light, warmth and water, clears away the weeds and protects against disease or attack. The flowers will then grow naturally and mature into their full ‘flowerness’. The gardener is not trying to impose his will or ‘make’ the flower other than it naturally is. Counselling and therapy also involve ‘trusting the process’ of the client and not being attached to any particular outcome. It means the counsellor is free to engage wholeheartedly in whichever path the client chooses. It is also, of course, at the heart of field theory, the phenomenological method and the acceptance of the client’s existential choice. It is trust in the healthiness of organismic self-regulation and in the deeper wisdom that lies within us all. Most of all, it is trust that if we as counsellors provide the proper conditions, in the process of the therapy the client will choose his own right direction.

It is clear, therefore, that there can be no particular skills or techniques associated with creative indifference. It is about the cultivation of an attitude that is at the heart of all the Gestalt skills. Being fully in the here and now, meeting with another person without preconditions, is a potentially frightening experience as well as an exciting one. We are facing the unknown and that can make us feel insecure. We then feel a strong urge to take control by planning and predicting. As Gestalt counsellors, we should try to resist that urge and, instead, risk staying with the uncertainty.

This paradoxical view of change is in direct contrast with other therapy models which contract for behavioural outcomes, try to remove symptoms and see resistance as something to be overcome. In Gestalt counselling, symptoms and resistance are expressions of creative adjustments the client is making to a situation, usually where there is not enough self-support. Trying to remove or overcome resistance is like trying to lose or overpower an essential part of the person. When the problem or dilemma is accepted and awareness is restored, all the different aspects and parts of the client are available as resources for natural growth and change.
Example

[Taken from the practice notes of one of the authors] Jean-Luc had come for counselling following a series of failed relationships which had left him feeling miserable and fearful of new social situations. He said he wanted to feel happy again but did not want to 'look at the past' as he had previously experienced this as a waste of time in an earlier counselling experience. At the assessment session, he wanted me to tell him what to do to feel better and hoped I would give him some answers. He thought that his social inadequacy (as he described it) was due to something he was doing wrong in social gatherings. As we started to make a contract for an initial six sessions, I explained my reluctance to agree with his picture of how I might help him and offered an alternative perspective on how we might first understand his story before coming to any conclusions about what was needed. Jean-Luc was unconvinced but agreed to try it as he was desperate and had felt some relief at telling me of his distress. During the next few months, he told me his story in great detail and asked less and less for my opinion or suggestions. [I will omit my therapeutic responses; suffice it to say that I was content to focus on phenomenology and offering a dialogic relationship.]

At our six-month review, Jean-Luc was puzzled at the fact that he seemed to be enjoying life more, felt more hopeful about his situation and had started a new relationship, which so far was not following its usual rocky path. He was at a loss to understand how things had got better without him or me 'trying' to make deliberate changes.

It has been a common experience of ours that the paradoxical principle of change is subtle and clients often know that counselling has helped but cannot easily articulate any particular reason for it having done so. Having said this, however, we wish to make the point that the human situation is often very complex and we believe that there is also a place for deliberate, thought-out or wished-for change that needs determination and courage. An example may be your decision to follow a career as a counsellor and to persist through the obstacles of training courses to reach the desired outcome. There is a subtle discrimination to be made between introjected, cultural or societal pressures to be different and a real desire or aspiration freely chosen by the whole person in full awareness. We hope to demonstrate later in the book how a therapeutic journey can be made which respects the paradoxical theory of change and also allows for goals and desires deliberately chosen.

Conclusion

The importance of awareness is emphasized continually in this book. It is part of assessment, it is the heart of the phenomenological method and the dialogic
relationship; it is the prime function of experiments. It is the dynamic behind the
paradoxical principle of change. This chapter has focussed simply on awareness
itself, the meaning of it and its inherent value. The final comment, however, is
a reiteration of the importance of your own awareness as a therapeutic tool. Your
full, aware contact with yourself, your client and the particular field conditions
will be both a model to your client and also a constant invitation to him to do
the same.

Recommended reading

G.I.C. Press.
73–84.
Sills, C., Fish, S. and Lapworth, P. (1995) Gestalt Counselling. (see Chapter 4) Oxon:
Winslow Press.
Journal Press.