The contact boundary

The contact boundary is where we meet and withdraw from our environment. Examples of our contact boundaries can be seen as our skin and our senses. However, if we limit ourselves to such a definition we do not take into account less easily defined ways of contacting such as intuition, sensing and spiritual contact. We also run the risk of giving the impression that the process of making contact is always initiated by us when the process of *gestalt formation*, making sense of our world, comes from the whole situation – both the person and the environment (PHG, 1951). It is in this process of meeting and withdrawing at our contact boundary that we creatively adjust in relation to our environment.

The contact boundary is the point at which one experiences the ‘me’ in relation to that which is not ‘me’ and through this contact, both are more clearly experienced.

(Polster and Polster, 1973: 102)

The term ‘boundary’ may conjure up the wrong image for I am not talking of a fixed point but (in health) a fluid, ever-changing place where we meet our situation and our situation meets us. Some diagrammatic representations, such as those illustrated in Point 14, can inadvertently give the impression that there is a fixed dividing line between internal and external experience – such is the nature of maps. I believe that a fine example of the fluidity of the contact boundary is made by Latner (1985) where he describes it as an event rather than a thing, and draws the analogy of our meeting with our environment with the shoreline’s meeting of sand and sea. ‘We would not say that the shoreline belongs to the sand or the sea. It is brought into being by their meeting’ (Latner, 1985).

To illustrate the changing nature of the contact boundary in relation to our field I would like to invite you to complete the following exercise.
Maps for a Gestalt Therapy Journey

Experiential exercise

Make a list of six to eight significant people from different areas of your life. Picture them in a familiar setting, one in which you readily associate in your contact with them. Now consider how permeable, semi-permeable or impermeable your contact boundary is in relation to each of them. Do you let them in readily? Are you wary around any of them? Do you merge or are you resistant? Once you have considered this, I’d like you to ‘shuffle the pack’. Picture each of the characters in unfamiliar settings, e.g. your manager in your home. As you imagine, note any change that may occur in your contact boundary in relation to them. Do you notice any softening or hardening? What sensations are you aware of in your body?

For healthy functioning our contact boundaries need to be permeable enough to allow nourishment and intimacy in, and sufficiently impermeable to maintain autonomy and to resist what is toxic in the environment. Consequently, healthy functioning is not defined by how permeable or impermeable our contact boundaries are in isolation, rather by our capacity to move along a permeable – impermeable continuum in relation to the present situation. At one end of this continuum is complete merging, what we refer to in gestalt as confluence (see Point 19) and at the other extreme, isolation marked by an armouring against letting anything in. Whilst these might be examples of the extremes of the continuum, degrees might be represented by openness or a tendency to agree, which suggest a more permeable contact boundary, whereas guardedness, defensiveness and being confrontational may suggest more rigidity at the contact boundary. Neither is inherently healthy or unhealthy. The ebb and flow of the tide of contact between self and other is always co-created in the between of the relationship.