

## IN CONTEXT

APPROACH  
Gestalt therapy

## BEFORE

**1920s** Carl Jung says that people need to connect with their inner selves.

**1943** Max Wertheimer explains the Gestalt idea of “productive thinking,” which is distinctive for using personal insight.

**1950** In *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Karen Horney identifies the need to reject the “shoulds” imposed by others.

## AFTER

**1961** Carl Rogers says that it is the client, not the therapist, who knows what form and direction therapy should take.

**1973** American self-help author Richard Bandler, one of the founders of Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), uses many of the Gestalt therapy techniques in his new therapy.

In the 18th century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant revolutionized our thinking about the world by pointing out that we can never really know what is “out there” beyond ourselves, because our knowledge is limited to the constraints of our minds and senses. We don’t know how things are “in themselves,” but only as we experience them. This view forms the basis of Gestalt therapy, which says that it is vitally important to remember that the complexity of the human experience—with its tragedies and traumas, inspirations and passions, and its nearly infinite

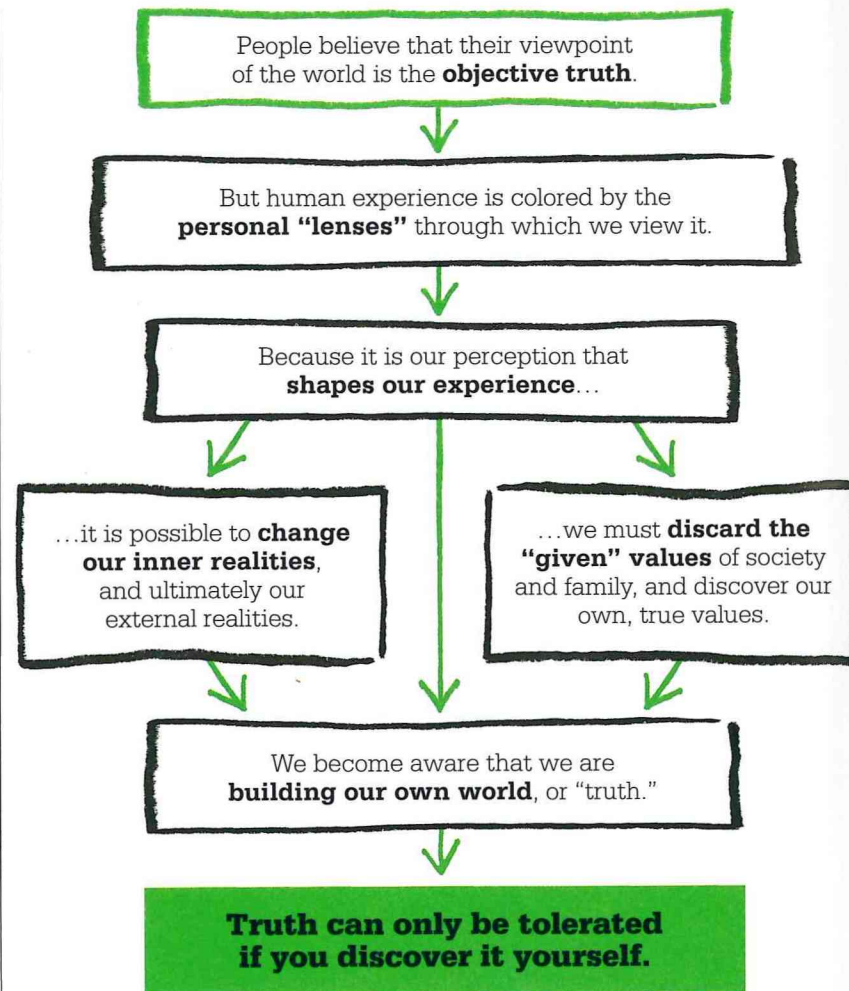
range of possibilities—is coded by the individual “lenses” through which we view it. We do not automatically absorb all the sounds, feelings, and pictures of the world; we scan and select just a few.

Fritz Perls, one of the founders of Gestalt therapy, pointed out that this means our personal sense of reality is created through our perception; through the ways in which we view our experiences, not the events themselves. However, it is easy to forget this, or even fail to recognize it. He says we tend to mistake our viewpoint of the world for the absolute, objective truth,

rather than acknowledging the role of perception and its influence in creating our perspective, together with all the ideas, actions, and beliefs that stem from it. For Perls, the only truth one can ever have is one’s own personal truth.

**Accepting responsibility**

Perls developed his theories in the 1940s, when the dominant psychoanalytical view was that the human mind could be reduced to a series of biological drives seeking fulfillment. This approach was far too rigid, structured, simplified, and generalized for Perls; it did not



**See also:** Søren Kierkegaard 26–27 ■ Carl Jung 102–107 ■ Karen Horney 110 ■ Erich Fromm 124–29 ■ Carl Rogers 130–37 ■ Abraham Maslow 138–39 ■ Roger Shepard 192 ■ Jon Kabat-Zinn 210 ■ Max Wertheimer 335

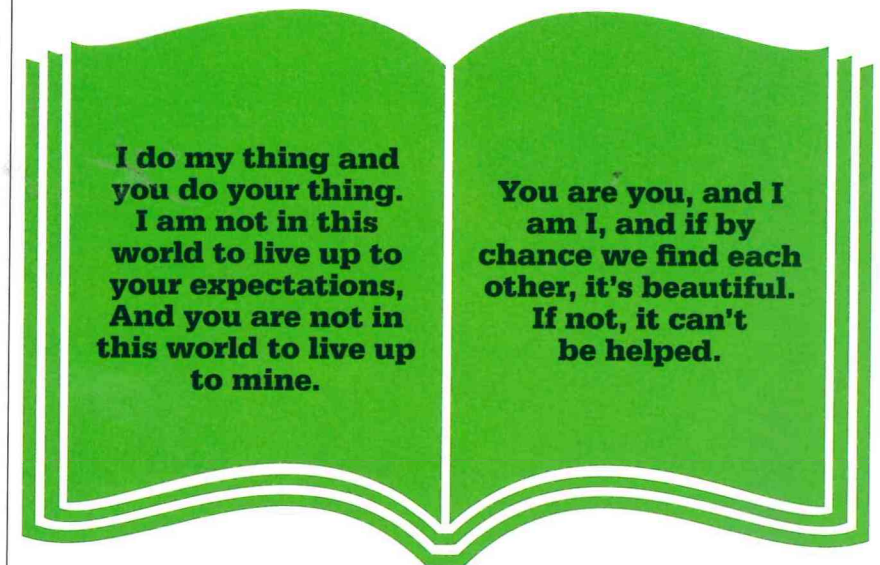
allow for individual experience, which Perls held paramount. Nor did its analysts enable their patients to recognize and take responsibility for the creation of their experience. The psychoanalytical model operates on the understanding that patients are at the mercy of their unconscious conflicts until an analyst enters to save them from their unconscious drives. Perls, on the other hand, feels it is essential for people to understand the power of their own roles in creation. He wants to make us aware that we can change our realities, and in fact are responsible for doing so. No one else can do it for us. Once we realize that perception is the backbone of reality, each of us is forced to take responsibility for the life we create and the way we choose to view the world.

**Acknowledging power**

Gestalt theory uses the tenets of individual experience, perception, and responsibility—both for one’s thoughts and feelings—to encourage personal growth by establishing a sense of internal control. Perls insists that we can learn to control our inner experience, regardless of

“  
Learning is  
the discovery that  
something is possible.  
Fritz Perls  
”

**The Gestalt prayer** was written by Fritz Perls to encapsulate Gestalt therapy. It emphasizes the importance of living according to our own needs, and not seeking fulfillment through others.

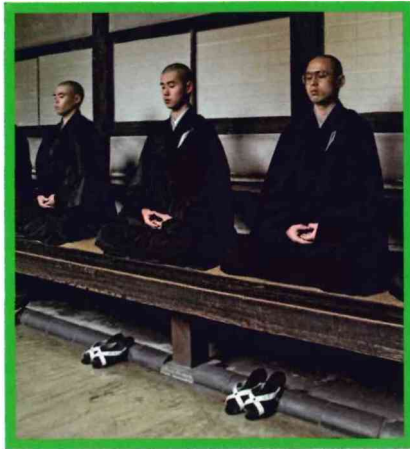


our external environment. Once we understand that our perception shapes our experience, we can see how the roles we play and the actions we take are tools, which we can then use consciously for changing reality. Control of our own inner psychic environment gives us power through two layers of choice: in how to interpret the environment, and how to react to it. The adage, “no one can make you angry other than yourself,” perfectly exemplifies this philosophy, and its truth can be seen played out in the different ways that people react to traffic jams, bad news, or personal criticism, for example.

In Gestalt therapy, a person is forced to take direct responsibility for how he or she acts and reacts, regardless of what may seem to be happening. Perls refers to this ability

to maintain emotional stability regardless of the environment as “homeostasis,” using a biological term normally used to describe the maintenance of a stable physical environment within the body. It implies a fine balancing of many systems, and this is how Gestalt therapy views the mind. It looks for ways of balancing the mind through the many thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that make up the whole human experience. It views a person holistically and places the focus firmly on the whole, not the parts.

Perls saw his task as helping his patients to cultivate an awareness of the power of their perceptions, and how they shape reality (or what we describe as “reality”). In this way, his patients became able to take control of shaping their interior landscape. In taking »



**Like Buddhism, Gestalt therapy** encourages the development of mindful awareness and the acceptance of change as inevitable. Perls called change “the study of creative adjustments.”

responsibility for their perceived sense of reality, they could create the reality they wanted.

Perls helped his patients achieve this through teaching them the integral processes of Gestalt therapy. The first and most important process is learning to cultivate awareness and to focus that awareness on the feelings of the present moment. This allows the individual to directly experience his or her feelings and

perceived reality in the present moment. This ability, to “be here now” is critical to the Gestalt process; it is an acute emotional awareness, and one that forms the foundation for understanding how each of us creates and reacts to our own environment. It also offers a pathway for learning how to change the ways we experience ourselves and our environment.

As a tool for personal growth, the ability to get in touch with authentic feelings—true thoughts and emotions—is more important to Perls than the psychological explanations or analytic feedback of other forms of therapy. The “why” behind behavior holds little significance for Perls; what is important is the “how” and “what.” This devaluing of the need to find out “why” and the shift of responsibility for meaning from analyst to patient brought with it a profound change in the therapist-patient hierarchy. Where previous approaches in therapy generally involved a therapist manipulating the patient toward the therapeutic goal, the Gestalt approach is characterized by a warm, empathic relationship between therapist and

patient, who work together as partners toward the goal. The therapist is dynamic but does not lead the patient; the Gestalt approach of Perls would later form the basis of Carl Rogers’ humanistic, person-centered approach.

#### A denial of fate

Another component in the Gestalt method involves the use of language. One critical tool patients are given for increasing self-awareness is the instruction to notice and change the use of the word “I” within speech. Perls says that to take responsibility for our reality, we must recognize how we use language to give the illusion that we have no control when this is not the case. By simply rephrasing “I can’t do that” to “I won’t do that,” it becomes clear that I am making a choice. This also helps to establish ownership of feeling; emotions arise in and belong to me; I cannot blame someone or something else for my feelings.

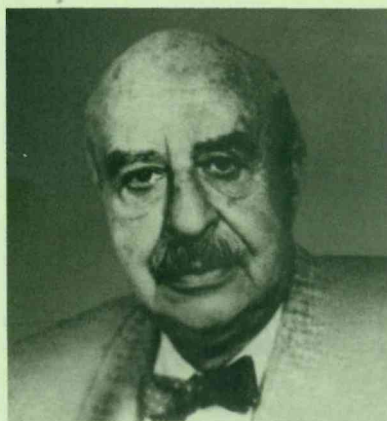
Other examples of language change include replacing the word “should” with “want,” changing, for example, “I should leave now” to “I want to leave now.” This also acts to reveal the element of choice. As

thought. In the late 1960s, they separated, and Perls moved to California, where he continued to change the landscape of psychotherapy. He left the US to start a therapy center in Canada in 1969, but died one year later of heart failure while conducting a workshop.

#### Key works

1946 *Ego Hunger and Aggression*  
1969 *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*  
1973 *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy*

#### Fritz Perls



Frederick “Fritz” Salomon Perls was born in Berlin at the end of the 19th century. He studied medicine, and after a short time in the German army during World War I, graduated as a doctor. He then trained as a psychiatrist, and after marrying the psychologist Laura Posner in 1930, emigrated to South Africa, where he and Laura set up a psychoanalytic institute. Becoming disenchanted with the over-intellectualism of the psychoanalytic approach, they moved to New York City in the late 1940s and became immersed in a thriving culture of progressive



“  
Lose your mind and  
come to your senses.  
Fritz Perls

”  
**The 1960s hippie culture** chimed with the Gestalt idea of finding oneself, but Perls warned against the “peddlers of instant joy” and the “so-called easy road of sensory liberation.”

we learn to take responsibility for our experience, Perls says, we develop authentic selves that are free from society’s influence. We also experience self-empowerment as we realize that we are not at the mercy of things that “just happen.” Feelings of victimization dissolve once we understand that what we accept for ourselves in our lives—what we selectively perceive and experience—is a choice; we are not powerless.

“  
If you need encouragement,  
praise, pats on the back  
from everybody, then  
you make everybody  
your judge.  
Fritz Perls

With this personal responsibility comes the obligation to refuse to experience events, relationships, or circumstances that we know to be wrong for our authentic selves. Gestalt theory also asks us to look closely at what we choose to accept among our society’s norms. We may have acted under the assumption of their truth for so long that we automatically accept them. Perls says we need instead to adopt beliefs that best inspire and develop our authentic self. The ability to write our own personal rules, determine our own opinions, philosophies, desires, and interests is of the essence. As we increase our awareness of self-accountability, self-reliance, and self-insight, we understand that we are building our own world, or truth. The lives we are living become easier to bear, because “truth can be tolerated only if you discover it yourself.”

#### The possibility of intimacy

Gestalt therapy’s emphasis on “being in the present” and finding one’s own path and one’s own ideas fitted perfectly within the 1960s

counter-culture revolution of the Western world. But this focus on individualism was seen by some psychologists and analysts as a weakness within the therapy, especially by those who view human beings as, above all, social beings. They claim that a life lived along Gestalt principles would exclude the possibility of intimacy with another, and that it focuses too much on the individual at the expense of the community. In response, supporters of Gestalt therapy have claimed that without the development of an authentic self, it would not be possible to develop an authentic relationship with another.

In 1964, Perls became a regular lecturer at the Esalen Institute in California, becoming a lasting influence on this renowned center for spiritual and psychological development. After an explosion of popularity in the 1970s, Gestalt therapy fell out of favor, but its tenets were accepted into the roots of other forms of therapy. Gestalt is today recognized as one of many “standard” approaches to therapy. ■