

Academic/Research Paper

A simulated interview with Fritz Perls: Part 1 - Benefits of living in the moment

By James C. Overholser, Ph.D., ABPP

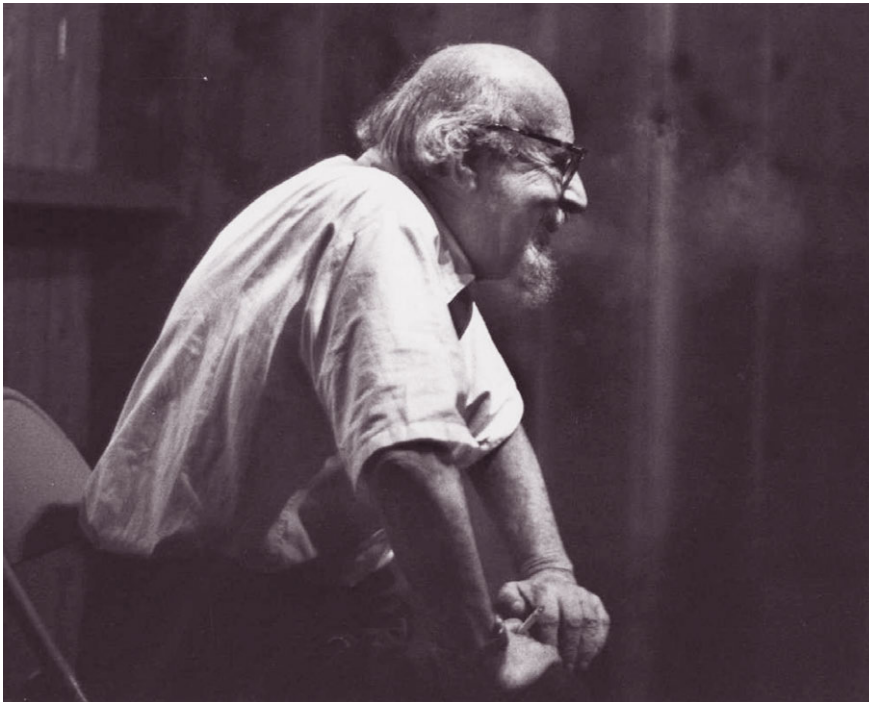


Photo source: exploringyourmind.com

Gestalt therapy was developed by Frederick Salomon Perls, usually called Fritz. Perls described himself as “the finder” instead of “the founder” of Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969a)

Perls was born in 1893 and raised in Berlin (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). During his youth, he developed an interest in theatrics and even appeared as an extra in several plays in the Royal Theater in Berlin (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). Later, he developed a relationship with a dancer who inspired an interest in movement as a form of self-expression. These experiences helped him to appreciate

the nonverbal aspects of communication and value of visual expressiveness.

Perls earned his medical degree in 1920 and soon focused on psychoanalysis as his main intervention. For a time, Perls worked with Kurt Goldstein at the Institute for Brain Damaged Soldiers in Frankfurt. This experience awakened Perls' interest in gestalt psychology and holistic views. Perls became

“I hope you don’t expect me to give you a prescription for living”

(Perls, 1970a, p. 32)

disillusioned by the Freudian dogma, and began experimenting with a more active form of psychotherapy. He provided individual therapy sessions but developed a preference for group therapy and public workshops.

In 1929, Fritz Perls married Lore Posner, and together they had two children, Renate and Steve. During the early days of World War II, Perls was forced to leave his homeland Germany to avoid persecution by the Nazi regime (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). In 1933, he relocated to Amsterdam, then moved to Johannesburg South Africa a year later. From 1942 until 1945, Perls served as a medical officer for the South African army during World War II. After the war, Perls relocated to United States until his death from heart failure in 1970.

Over the course of his career, he collaborated with his wife, Laura Perls, when developing some of the seminal works in the area. However, Laura often remained in the background, whereas Fritz embraced the attention and made himself into the charismatic leader of the new form of psychotherapy. In many ways, Perls' approach to therapy was a natural product of his life and

personality (Thomason, 2016). Perls had a charismatic style that was well suited for public displays of the therapeutic process. Many of his ideas live on in those who practice gestalt therapy. Perls emphasized the importance of working in the here-and-now moment of therapy sessions, trying to improve the client's awareness of emotions and sensations. He valued perception based on the ever-changing landscape created by the shifting figure / ground relationship in which the focal point and background elements may shift positions. If the person was unable to complete the gestalt into a meaningful whole, it creates unfinished business. Further, Perls emphasized the premature and incomplete resolution of a situation is likely to result in unfinished business. In some important ways, Perls helped to lay the conceptual foundation for experiential therapy, emotion-focused interventions, and mindfulness training. The present article presents a simulated interview with Frederick (Fritz) Salomon Perls (FSP) led by James C. Overholser (JCO).

JCO: Thank you for meeting with me. I have found your ideas quite interesting.

FSP: "Okay. Sit down" (Perls, 1973, p. 121). "What is your name?" (Perls in Bry, 1972, p. 60).

JCO: You can call me Jim.

FSP: "I hope you don't expect me to give you a prescription for living" (Perls, 1970a, p. 32).

JCO: No, I am just hoping to understand your views of therapy. Why did you call your approach 'Gestalt Therapy'?

"If a need is genuinely satisfied, the situation changes ... As one task is finished it recedes into the background"

(Perls, 1948, p. 571)

FSP: "Gestalt is a cohesive 'one' which you can't cut up into different parts" (Perls, 1978a, p. 67). "A gestalt is an irreducible phenomenon. It is an essence that is there and that disappears if the whole is broken up into its components" (Perls, 1969b, p. 62). "Take a quite well-known gestalt, a melody. A melody can be transposed so that each part, each note, is different from the one before, but the melody, the gestalt, is still the same" (Perls, 1978a, p. 67).

JCO: How does someone learn to see the big picture like that?

FSP: "When I've learned to type well and formed the gestalt by practice, then I'm free to attend to the content and not the mechanics of typing" (Clements 1968, p. 68).

JCO: So you help people step back from details and see the larger patterns?

FSP: "The basic premise of Gestalt psychology is that human nature is organized into patterns or whole" (Perls, 1973, pp. 3-4). "One's visual field is structured in terms of 'figure' and 'background'. ... 'Figure' is the focus of interest ... with 'ground' the setting or context. The interplay between figure and ground is dynamic" (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951, p. 29). "A meaning is created by relating a figure, the

foreground, to the background against which the figure appears" (Perls, 1969b, p. 63).

JCO: How does this apply to therapy?

FSP: "Only one event can occupy the foreground, dominating the situation" (Perls, 1969b, p. 88). "Something similar is done in radio. If the required station is tuned in, the hissing of the background is subdued; the contrast of the foreground music to a background of complete silence is what is desired" (Perls, 2012, p. 105). "The figure standing out in relief against the more indifferent background needs some amplification" (Perls, 1978b, p. 51). "It is, of course, the relevance of environmental objects to the organism's needs which determines the figure/ground process" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 66). "The dominant need of the organism, at any time, becomes the foreground figure, and the other needs recede, at least temporarily, into the background" (Perls, 1973, p. 8). "Effective action is action directed towards the satisfaction of a dominant need" (Perls, 1973, p. 18).

JCO: So we all work to satisfy our needs?

FSP: "Yes, yes" (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 67). "If a need is genuinely satisfied, the situation changes ... As one task is finished it recedes into the background" (Perls, 1948, p. 571). "The most important unfinished situation will always emerge and can be dealt with" (Perls, 1969a, p. 54).

JCO: So an unfinished need clamors for attention?

FSP: “Exactly” (Perls, in Clements, 1968, p. 71). “Any unfinished situation, any incomplete action, will come to the surface and will be or wants to be completed” (Clements, 1968, p. 67). “The organism cannot tolerate an unfinished situation” (Perls, 1953-54, p. 51).

JCO: What happens if we leave some situations unresolved?

FSP: “Whenever we find an unfinished situation it means we are still carrying with us some business from the past which we have to finish” (Perls, 1978a, p. 58). “Unfinished situations cry for solutions, but if they are barred from awareness, neurotic symptoms and neurotic character formation will be the result” (Perls, 1948, p. 573). “A neurotic is always characterized by the great number of unfinished situations. The patient is either not aware of them or is incapable of coping with them” (Perls, 1948, p. 571).

JCO: How does this guide psychotherapy?

FSP: “In psychotherapy we look for the urgency of unfinished situations in the present situation” (Perls, 1951, p. 275). “It is a basic tendency of the organism to complete any situation or transaction which for it is unfinished” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 90). “The organism cannot tolerate an unfinished situation. With every finished situation, we feel good; with every unfinished situation, we feel bad” (Perls, 1953-54, p. 51). “As one task is finished it recedes into the background” (Perls, 1948, p. 571).

JCO: So psychotherapy helps clients move toward some sense of closure?

“Gestalt therapy is therefore a ‘here and now’ therapy, in which we ask the patient during the session to turn all his attention to what he is doing at the present, during the course of the session – right here and now”

(Perls, 1973, p. 63)

FSP: “No, there is more to it” (Perls, 1970a, p. 25). “The neurotic obviously does not feel like a whole person. He feels as if his conflicts and unfinished business were tearing him to shreds” (Perls, 1973, p. 15). “If the gestalt is not completed, we are left with unfinished situations” (Perls, 1973, p. 119). “After one gestalt receives satisfaction, the organism can deal with the next urgent frustration” (Perls, 1969b, p. 89).

JCO: But some past struggles are left with loose ends.

FSP: “I maintain that the past is of significance only as far as it embodies unfinished situations” (Perls, 1979, p. 14). “Wherever we find an unfinished situation it means we are still carrying with us some business from the past which we have to finish” (Perls, 2012, p. 148). “We carry much of the past with us only as far as we have unfinished situations” (Perls, 1969a, p. 45). “We cannot possibly be aware of the past and cannot possibly be aware of the future. We are aware of memories, we are aware of anticipation, and of plans of the future; but we are aware here and now” (Perls, 1973, p. 192).

JCO: So you have no interest in a client’s past?

FSP: “It would not be accurate to say there that there is no interest in historical material and in the past” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 2). “While it is pathological to live in the past or future, it is healthy ... to remember past occurrences and to plan for future events” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 90).

JCO: Some of my clients remain troubled by their memory of events that happened weeks, months or years ago.

FSP: “Memories disappear, except for unfinished situations ... Imagine a waiter remembering all the orders he has ever taken! There is no need for a memory after the customer has paid his bill” (Perls, 2012, p. 168). “We justify our current unhappiness by our past experiences, and wallow in our misery” (Perls, 1973, p. xiv). “Through therapy, he must learn to live in the present” (Perls, 1973, p. 63). “Delving into the past serves the purpose of finding ‘causes’ – and thus excuses – for the present situation” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 44).

JCO: Why not spend some time in session exploring the past?

FSP: “The past is what is unchanging and essentially unchangeable” (Perls et al. 1951, p. 437). “When the individual is frozen to an outmoded way of acting, he is less capable of meeting any of this survival needs, including his social needs” (Perls, 1973, p. 25-26).

JCO: So clients need to fully live in the present moment?

FSP: “Nothing exists except the

here and now” (Perls, 1969a, p. 44). “The past exists no more and the future is not yet” (Perls, 1979, p. 13). “No experience is ever possible except in the present” (Perls, 1973, p. 64). “Gestalt therapy is therefore a ‘here and now’ therapy, in which we ask the patient during the session to turn all his attention to what he is doing at the present, during the course of the session – right here and now” (Perls, 1973, p. 63).

JCO: I am not clear. How does this help to guide therapy sessions?

FSP: “All therapy that has to be done can only be done in the now” (Perls, 1970a, p. 17). “We don’t have to dig ala Freud, into the deepest unconscious” (Perls, 1973, p. 119). “We deal only with the present” (Perls, 2012, p. 174). “Since all sensing takes place in the here and now, gestalt therapy is ‘present time’ oriented” (Perls, 1967, p. 308).

JCO: I like to look to the future. Why focus so much on the moment?

FSP: “The aim is to expand, or, better, to heighten awareness of what you are doing and how you are doing it” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 46). “The senses are the means of awareness, consciousness, attention” (Perls, 1948, p. 570). “Through therapy, he must learn to live in the present ... we ask the patient during the session to turn all his attention to what he is doing at the present, during the course of the session - right here and now” (Perls, 1973, p. 63). “The healthy person trusts his senses rather than his concepts, his prejudices” (Perls, 1969c, p. 24).

JCO: So you use therapy to expand

“It is important to avoid confusing self-consciousness with self-awareness”

(Perls, 1969c, p. 255)

the client’s awareness of the present moment?

FSP: “Exactly. That’s what I wanted to point out” (Perls, 1970b, p. 229). “As long as you are awake, you are at every moment aware of something” (Perls et al.1951, p. 96). “We treat all time during the therapeutic session as if it were here and now; for awareness and experience can only take place in the present” (Perls, 1973, p. 87). “No experience is ever possible except in the present” (Perls, 1973, p. 64).

JCO: So, you feel awareness in the present moment is essential?

FSP: “Awareness per se - by and of itself - can be curative” (Perls, 1969a, p. 17). “Without awareness there is nothing” (Perls, 1969b, p. 68). “Lack of awareness is characteristic for the neurotic” (Perls, 1948, p. 570). “The goal of psychotherapy is ... for the patient to become aware of himself” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 383).

JCO: But wouldn’t the focus on awareness make some people feel more self-conscious?

FSP: “It is important to avoid confusing self-consciousness with self-awareness” (Perls, 1969c, p. 255). “Self-interruptions can readily be observed. The ‘er .. er’ and ‘uh’ of any self-conscious speaker” (Perls, 1978b, p. 54). “Correct concentration is best

described by the word fascination ... the rest of the world disappears time and surroundings cease to exist” (Perls, 1969a, p. 188). “When, for instance, you are fully absorbed in dancing that you feel the oneness of mind, body, soul, music and rhythm, then you realize the pleasure of self-awareness ... In self-consciousness there is always something unexpressed, ... self-consciousness can only be disposed of by conveying in actuality your feelings to the person concerned” (Perls, 1969c, p. 255).

JCO: How do you help clients to improve their awareness of the present moment?

FSP: “I suggest, for example, the following experiment: Let him begin every sentence with the words ‘here and now’ and observe how he reacts” (Perls, 1948, p. 575). “Often, however, the patient will escape from experiencing the present. He will go into the past or the future” (Perls, 1979, p. 14). “We frequently find the flight into the past, looking for so-called causes and explanations and other avoidances of responsibility” (Perls, 1979, p. 14). “The flight into the past is mostly characteristic of people who need scapegoats. These people fail to realize that, despite what has happened in the past, their present life is their own, and it is now their own responsibility to remedy their shortcomings, whatever they may be” Perls, 1969c, p. 208).

JCO: Yes, many of my clients want to discuss past events.

FSP: “The goal of psychotherapy is to make awares unawares [sic] conflicts and to remove

false conflicts” (Perls, & Goodman 1950, p. 5). “We use the word ‘unaware’, but give it a much wider scope than ... the unconscious” (Perls, 2012, p. 89). “Psychotherapy means assisting the patient in facing those facts which he hides from himself” (Perls, 1969c, p. 189). “Avoidance is the main characteristic of neuroses” (Perls, 1969c, p. 189). “The neurotic avoids imaginary hurts such as unpleasant emotions. He also avoids taking reasonable risks. Both interfere with any chance of maturation” (Perls & Stevens, 1975, p. 4).

JCO: I have a few more questions.

FSP: “I see that you are playing with your hands” (Perls, 1978a, p. 56). “So, let’s interrupt this, at this moment, and do a little bit of gestalt therapy” (Perls, 1978a, p. 60). “What is your hand doing?” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 3).

JCO: Umm, just rubbing my fingers.

FSP: “What are you doing with your feet now? ... I can see you kicking your feet” (Dolliver et al., 1980, p. 137).

JCO: Sorry. I just tapped my foot. It doesn’t mean anything.

FSP: “No, there’s more to it” (Perls, 1970a, p. 25). “Now get your legs into the act” (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 114).

JCO: What ... Why?

FSP: “There are many times when the patient’s unwitting movement or gesture appears to be a significant communication” (Levitsky, & Perls, 1970, p. 9). “Awareness of body feelings, of sensations and perceptions,

“Much of what you are only dimly aware and almost unaware can be brought into awareness by giving it the requisite amount of attention and interest”

(Perls et al., 1951, p. 97)

constitutes our most certain ... knowledge” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 4). “Take into account any involuntary movements the patient makes - shrugging his shoulders, kicking his feet, etc., and draw the patient’s attention to them” (Perls, 1973, p. 87).

JCO: Can we get back to the interview?

FSP: “Let’s interrupt this, at this moment, and do a little bit of Gestalt therapy” (Perls, 1978a, p. 60). “Begin meditation by closing your eyes and just listening to your own thinking, whatever you are saying to yourself” (Perls, 1970a, p. 35). “Close your eyes and attend to your breathing” (Perls, 1973, p. 173). “First get rid of the bad air, the carbon monoxide, and then bring in the fresh air” (Perls, 1978a, p. 62). “Concentrate on your ‘body’ sensations” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 100). “Close your eyes. Enter your body. What do you experience physically?” (Perls in Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 113). “What are you aware of now?” (Perls, 2012, p. 184).

JCO: My mind was racing through a lot of thoughts.

FSP: “Allow yourself to withdraw when there is no interest” (Perls, 1970a, p. 36). “The empty mind in Eastern philosophy is worthy of

highest praise. So lose your mind and come to your senses” (Perls, 1970a, p. 38).

JCO: Your ideas seem closely aligned with mindfulness-based strategies.

FSP: “Say this again” (Perls, 1970b, p. 209).

JCO: It sounds like you recommend a nonjudgmental awareness of thoughts.

FSP: “You are right” (Perls, 1969b, p. 207). “Our strategy for developing self-awareness is to extend in every direction the areas of present awareness” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 95). “Much of what you are only dimly aware and almost unaware can be brought into awareness by giving it the requisite amount of attention and interest” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 97). “Now, you see what I just did was a typical little piece of Gestalt therapy” (Perls, 1978a, p. 58). “How do you feel now?” (Perls in Dolliver, 1980, p. 300).

JCO: Okay, I see the value of slowing down and being in the moment.

FSP: “The aim is to expand or, better, to heighten, awareness of what you are doing and how you are doing it” (Perls et al, 1951, p. 46). “The ideal therapy ... should be restricted to the here and now and the communication between therapist and patient” (Perls, 2012, p. 174). “A good therapist doesn’t listen to the content of the bullshit the patient produces, but to the sound, to the music, to the hesitations. Verbal communication is usually a lie. The real communication is beyond words ... So don’t listen to the words, just listen to what the voice

tells you, what the movements tell you, what the posture tells you ... What we say is mostly either lies or bullshit” (Perls, 1969a, p. 57). “The nonverbal is always more important than the verbal. Words lie and persuade; but the posture, the voice, the nonverbal behavior is true” (Perls, 1973, p. 155). “Therapy, then, consists in analysing ... *how* what is said is said, with what facial expression, what tone of voice, what syntax, what posture, what affect, what omission” (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 85).

JCO: Does your approach try to help clients get in better touch with reality?

FSP: “The answer is no” (Perls, 1978a, p. 70). “Reality per se does not exist ... it is something different for each individual ... Reality is determined by the individual’s specific interests and needs ... Whatever is the organism’s foremost need ... evokes our interest, attention” (Perls, 1948, p. 571). “Reality is nothing but the sum of all

“*We assume there is an objective world from which the individual creates his subjective world*”

(Perls in Brownell, 2010, pp. 126-127)

awareness as you experience here and now” (Perls, 1969b, p. 30).

JCO: So you focus on the client’s subjective experience?

FSP: “We assume there is an objective world from which the individual creates his subjective world” (Perls in Brownell, 2010, pp. 126-127). “Reality is determined by the individual’s specific interests and needs ... Whatever is the organism’s foremost need makes reality appear as it does. It makes such objects stand out as figures which correspond to diverse needs. It evokes our interest, attention” (Perls, 1948, p. 571). “The reality which matters is the reality of interests” (Perls, 1969c, p. 40).

FSP: “Let’s introduce the empty chair ... Now change seats” (Perls, 1973, p. 122).

JCO: Can we just get back to our conversation?

FSP: “I’m tired now. Let’s get together sometime soon and talk” (Perls, 1969b, p. 22).

JCO: Wonderful. I will come back next month. ☺

James C. Overholser

Jim Overholser is a professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, and is a licensed clinical psychologist who provides outpatient psychotherapy through a local training clinic. Dr. Overholser conducts research on depression and suicide risk and has published books on suicide prevention and the Socratic method of psychotherapy.

REFERENCES

- Brownell, P. (2010). *A guide to contemporary practice: Gestalt Therapy*. Springer.
- Bry, B. (1972). Gestalt Therapy. In A. Bry (ed.) *Inside Psychotherapy* (pp. 57-70). Basic Books.
- Clarkson, P., & Mackewn, J. (1993). *Fritz Perls*. Sage.
- Clements, C. (1968). Acting out vs. acting through: An interview with Frederick Perls. *Voices*, 4 (4) 66-73.
- Dolliver, R., Williams, E., & Gold, D. (1980). The art of gestalt therapy or: What are you doing with your feet now? *Psychotherapy*, 17 (2), 136-142.
- Levitsky, A. & Perls, F.S. (1970). *The rules and games of gestalt therapy*. Science and Behavior Books.
- Perls, F.S. (1948). Theory and technique of personality integration. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 2(4), 565-586.
- Perls, F.S. & Goodman, P. (1950). The theory of the ‘Removal of Inner Conflict’. *Resistance* 8 (4), 5-6.
- Perls, F., Hefferline, R., & Goodman, P. (1951). *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. Bantam Books.
- Perls, F.S. (1953-54). Morality, ego boundary and aggression. *Complex*, 9, 42-52.
- Perls, F.S. (1967). Group vs. individual therapy. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 24 (3), 306-312.
- Perls, F. S. (1969a). *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. Bantam Books.
- Perls, F.S. (1969b). *In and out of the garbage pail*. Real People Press.
- Perls, F.S. (1969c). *Ego, hunger, and aggression. The beginning of Gestalt Therapy*. Vintage Books.
- Perls, F. (1970a). Four lectures in Gestalt Therapy. In F. Shepherd (Ed.) *Gestalt therapy now* (pp. 14-38). Science and Behavior Books.
- Perls, F. (1970b). Dream seminars. In F. Shephard (Ed.) *Gestalt therapy now* (pp. 204-233). Science and Behavior Books.
- Perls, F.S. (1973). *The Gestalt approach & eyewitness to therapy*. Science and Behavior Books.
- Perls, F.S. & Stevens, J. (1975). *Gestalt is*. Real People Press.
- Perls, F. S. (1978a). Cooper Union Forum—Lecture Series: “The Self,” and “Finding Self Through Gestalt Therapy.” *Gestalt Journal*, 1(1), 54-73.
- Perls, F. S. (1978b). Psychiatry in a new key: II. *Gestalt Journal*, 1(2), 49-65.
- Perls, F. S. (1979). Planned psychotherapy. *Gestalt Journal*, 2(2), 5-23.
- Perls, F.S. (2012). *From planned psychotherapy to Gestalt therapy: Essays and lectures - 1945 - 1965*. Gestalt Journal Press.
- Thomason, T. (2016). The shadow side of the great psychotherapists. *Counseling & Wellness Journal*, 5, 1-13.