

Academic/Research Article

A simulated interview with Fritz Perls: Part 2 - The process of therapy sessions

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“In Gestalt therapy, maturity is achieved by developing the individual’s own potential through decreasing environmental support, increasing his frustration tolerance and by debunking his phony playing of infantile adult roles” (Perls, 1978c, p. 76)

Gestalt therapy helps clients get in touch with their current sensory and emotional experience. The approach, founded by German psychiatrist Fritz Perls and his wife Laura Perls, tries to challenge habitual perceptions in an attempt to promote new learning (Peterson & Kolb, 2018). Clients are encouraged to increase their awareness of emotional reactions and express themselves in a candid manner. For many clients, it can be important to work through blocked emotions (O’Leary, 2013).

As an experiential therapy, Gestalt therapy focuses on the process more than the content of therapy (Praszkier & Nowak, 2021). Perls avoided lecturing to clients and instead promoted a process of self-discovery. Gestalt therapy includes strategies that are creative and some aspects may be different from more traditional forms of psychotherapy. He recommended a style of interacting with clients that is often direct and confrontational, helping clients to re-experience

difficult situations and express their emotional reactions.

Gestalt intervention strategies aim to help clients accept personal responsibility for their decisions and actions, promoting growth and maturity. In Gestalt therapy, the therapist may rely on skilful frustration to force clients to identify, accept and utilize their own coping resources, instead of relying on deceptive practices designed to manipulate others into providing various forms of nurturance, support, guidance or sympathy.

The Gestalt approach can help clients to deal with their traumatic reactions by bringing their memories into the present moment, confronting their fears and releasing pent-up feelings of anger or resentment. Aspects of Gestalt therapy seem to serve as the forerunner to experiential therapy and exposure-based treatments. In addition, because of its focus on emotions, some aspects of Gestalt therapy serve as a useful complement to cognitive therapy (Tonnesvang et al., 2010). This article explores the process of therapy as recommended by Fritz S. Perls (FSP) during a simulated conversation with James C. Overholser (JCO).

JCO: Thank you for meeting with me again.

FSP: “Well, let’s start right away” (Perls, 1969a, p. 114). “Are there some questions you’d like to ask?” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 71).

JCO: Certainly. In your view, how do psychological problems begin?

FSP: “Neurosis develops in an environment that does not facilitate this maturation process adequately” (Perls, 1967, p. 310). “People clog up their lives by dragging unpleasant parents around with them” (Perls, 1970a, pp. 34-35). “Possibly the most difficult feat for any patient is to forgive his parents” (Perls, 1970a, p. 27).

JCO: What do parents do wrong?

FSP: “Parents are never right. They are either too stern or too soft, too strong or too weak” (Perls, 1970a, p. 27). “Too much affection will spoil and suffocate the child ... Instead of encouraging self-support, the parents will condition the child to rely too much on their help” (Perls, 1978b, p. 62).

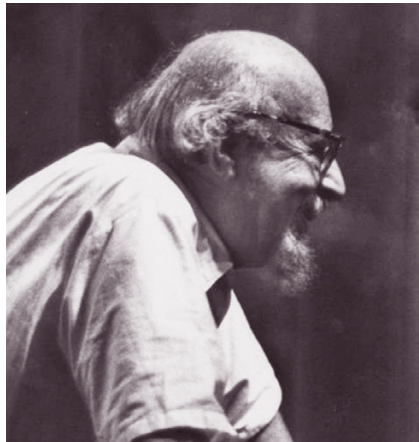
JCO: So, should a therapist become a supportive parental figure?

FSP: “Definitely not” (Perls, 1978a, p. 55). “Any helpful and too supportive therapist ... will only spoil that person more – by depriving him of the opportunity to discover his own strength, potential and resources. The therapist’s real tool here is skilful frustration” (Perls, 1967, p. 310).

JCO: You believe that therapists shouldn’t praise their clients?

FSP: “This is quite true” (Perls, in Dolliver, 1991, p. 302). “If you are in need of praise, then no amount of praise will ever get you enough” (Perls, 1953-54, p. 50). “If you need encouragement, praise, pats on the back from everybody, then you make everybody your judge” (Perls, 1969a, p. 36).

JCO: That is a powerful statement. So, in your view, frustration is a therapist’s tool.



Fritz Perls - Photo source: exploringyourmind.com

FSP: “Yes, yes” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 71). “To bring about the transformation from external to self-support, the therapist must frustrate the patient’s endeavours to get environmental support” (Perls, 1973, p. 105). “We frustrate the patient in such a way that he is forced to develop his own potential ... what he expects from the therapist, he can do just as well himself” (Perls, 1969a, p. 40).

JCO: You use frustration to provoke maturation?

FSP: “You might say that” (Perls, 1970a, p. 26). “If there is insufficient self support, we look for external support” (Perls, 1978b, p. 64). “In Gestalt therapy, maturity is achieved by developing the individual’s own potential through decreasing environmental support, increasing his frustration tolerance and by debunking his phony playing of infantile adult roles” (Perls, 1978c, p. 76). “The malfunctions of the neurotic become manifest in his lack of genuine self-expression” (Perls, 1948, p. 574).

JCO: Therapy helps clients to become their true self?

FSP: “The answer is no” (Perls, 1978a, p. 70). “The usual advice ‘be yourself’ is misleading, for the self

can be felt only as a potentiality” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 438). “It is simple to say ‘just be yourself’ but for the neurotic, a thousand obstacles bar the way” (Perls, 1973, p. 43). “The patient has taken great pains to build up a self-concept ... it is often a completely erroneous concept of himself” (Perls, 1973, p. 49).

JCO: Well, at least we can agree that therapy helps clients make positive changes.

FSP: “No, that’s not true” (Perls, 1969b, p. 57). “We cannot deliberately bring about changes in ourselves or in others” (Perls, 1969a, p. 20). “Nobody can at any given moment be different from what he is at this moment, including all the wishes and prayers that he should be different. We are what we are” (Perls, 1969a, p. 47). “No eagle will want to be an elephant, no elephant to be an eagle. They accept themselves ... they just are. They are what they are ... How absurd it would be if the elephant, tired of walking the earth, wanted to fly” (Perls, 1969b, p. 7). “Every individual, every plant, every animal has only one inborn goal – to actualize itself as it is” (Perls, 1969a, p. 33). “I am what I am, and at this moment I cannot possibly be different from what I am” (Perls, 1969a, p. 4).

JCO: So self-acceptance is key?

FSP: “Exactly. That’s what I wanted to point out” (Perls, 1970b, p. 229). “You never overcome anything by resisting it. You only can overcome anything by going deeper into it” (Perls, 1969a, p. 230). “If you go deeper into what you are, if you accept what is there, then a change automatically occurs by itself. This is the paradox of change” (Perls in Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 91).

JCO: How does a therapist guide this process?

FSP: “What we want to do in Gestalt therapy is to integrate all the dispersed and disowned alienated parts of the self and make the person whole again” (Perls, 1973, p. 179). “Our aim as therapists is to increase human potential through the process of integration. We do this by supporting the individual’s genuine interests, desires and needs” (Perls & Stevens, 1975, p. 1).

JCO: I’m still unclear as to *how* you work as a therapist.

FSP: “I almost never answer questions during therapy. Instead, I usually ask the patient to change the question into a statement” (Perls, 1970a, p. 26). “Every time you refuse to answer a question, you help the other person to develop his own resources” (Perls, 1969a, p. 38). “If you change your question into a statement, the background out of which the question arose opens up, and the possibilities are found by the questioner himself” (Perls, 1969a, p. 38). “You don’t ask questions, you just respond” (Perls, 1969a, p. 22).

JCO: What about sharing helpful advice with clients?

FSP: “I don’t think I can give you something through a lecture. I don’t think words can convey anything, especially anything about Gestalt therapy” (Perls, 1978a, pp. 54-55). “Probably the most dangerous thing a therapist can do is to play the computer game ... you feed information into their computers” (Perls, 1970a, p. 29). “I avoid any interpretation. I leave this to the patient since I believe he knows more about himself than I can possibly know” (Perls, 1970a, p. 27). “Every interpretation, of course, is an interference. You tell another person what they think and what they feel. You don’t let them discover themselves” (Perls, 1973, p. 142).

JCO: You believe that therapists should not use questions, advice or interpretations?

FSP: “I believe ... in learning by discovery rather than by drill and repetition” (Perls, 1969b, p. 33). “The therapist cannot make discoveries for the patient, he can only facilitate the process in the patient” (Perls, 1973, pp. 74-75). “Help the other person discover himself ... only what we discover ourselves is truly learned” (Perls, 1970a, p. 37).

JCO: How does a therapist promote discovery if it is supposed to be self-discovery?

FSP: “Self-discovery is an arduous process. Far from being a sudden flash of revelation, it is more or less continuous and cumulative” (Perls et al 1951, p. 3). “The successful experimenting of the trial and error kind comes with a glow of success and insight” (Perls, 2012, p. 76). “The patient is an active experimental partner in the session” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 36). “Learning is discovery” (Perls, 1969a, p. 27).

JCO: This sounds very Socratic.

FSP: “Yes, that’s very interesting” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 68). “Psychotherapy is a humane discipline, a development of Socratic dialectic” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 36). “This internal dialogue is what Socrates called the ‘essence of thinking’” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 229). “Am I becoming too philosophical?” (Perls, 1969b, p. 8).

JCO: Not at all. I have become quite interested in philosophy and the Socratic method.

FSP: “As for Socrates, he even surpassed my arrogance by saying ‘you are all fools to think that you know something! But I, Socrates, am not a fool. I know that I don’t know!

This gives me the right to torture you with questions and to show you what a fool you are!’” (Perls, 1969b, p. 74).

JCO: I think the Socratic dialogue is a useful framework for therapy sessions.

FSP: “As Socrates pointed out, the comic and tragic are not far apart, and the same event from different points of view may be comic or tragic” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 191).

JCO: Therefore it depends on how you look at the events?

FSP: “You might say that” (Perls, 1970a, p. 26). “Neurotic suffering is suffering in imagination” (Perls, 1973, p. 126). “Many of our catastrophic expectations have no validity” (Perls, 1969b, p. 254).

JCO: You help clients shift to a more rational perspective?

FSP: “Rational thinking has its place; in the assessment of the degree to which catastrophic expectation is mere imagination or exaggeration of real danger” (Perls, 1967, p. 311). “Difficult situations create wishful or magic thinking” (Perls, 1948, p. 570).

JCO: So therapy can aim to change a client’s beliefs?

FSP: “A basic error cannot be refuted ... it can be altered only by changing the conditions ... we allow for the emergence of a better judgement” (Perls in Brownell, 2010, p. 204). “Therapy ... consists in analyzing the internal structure of the actual experience ... not so much *what* is being remembered ... as *how* what is being remembered is remembered” (Perls et al 1951, p. 273). “To work through imaginary pains and unpleasant emotions we need a fine balance of frustration and support” (Perls & Stevens, 1975, p. 4).

JCO: How does therapy help to adjust a client's perspective?

FSP: "On your camera you have a view finder" (Perls, 1979, p. 10). "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 organizing principle that creates order from chaos; namely, the figure-ground formation. Whatever is the organism's need makes reality appear as it does ... It evokes our interest, attention" (Perls, 1948, p. 571).

JCO: Do you typically explore why clients have certain struggles?

FSP: "Oh no, not at all" (Perls, 1969b, p. 191). "'Why' questions produce only pat answers, defensiveness, rationalizations, excuses and the delusion that an event can be explained by a single cause ... All of the therapist's questions are interruptions of some ongoing process in the patient. They are intrusions" (Perls, 1973, p. 76). "'Why' cannot lead to understanding" (Perls, 1970a, p. 37). "'Why?' at best leads to clever explanations, but never to an understanding" (Perls, 1969a, p. 47).

JCO: I sometimes try to understand what motivates my clients.

FSP: "A major problem for all forms of psychotherapy is to motivate the patient to do what needs to be done" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 164). "The therapist is ... a catalyst, an ingredient which precipitates a reaction which might not otherwise occur" (Perls, 1951, p. 17). "What I do as therapist is to work as a catalyst ... I frustrate his avoidances ... until he is willing to mobilize his own resources" (Perls, 1969a, p. 56). "When I work ... I become nothing,

no-thing, a catalyst, and I enjoy my work. I forget myself" (Perls, 1969b, p. 218).

JCO: Let me change topics. It sounds like Gestalt therapy stirs up emotions.

FSP: "Emotions are the very life of us ... Emotions do not have to be explained, much less interpreted. They are the very language of the organism" (Perls, 1978b, p. 52). "One of the most serious problems of modern man is that he has desensitized himself to all but the most overwhelming kind of emotional response" (Perls, 1973, p. 84). "Modern man lives in a state of low-grade vitality. Though generally he does not suffer deeply, he also knows little of true creative living ... he wanders around aimlessly, not really knowing what he wants ... the expression on his face indicates his lack of any real interest in what he is doing ... his present activities are merely bothersome chores he has to get out of the way" (Perls, 1973, p. xiii).

JCO: Many of my clients are troubled by their persistent negative emotions.

FSP: "We have become phobic toward pain and suffering. Anything that is not fun or pleasant is to be avoided ... and the result is a lack of growth" (Perls, 1973, p. 118). "The enemy of development is this pain phobia – the unwillingness to do a tiny bit of suffering" (Perls, 1969a, p. 56).

JCO: Are some emotions emblematic of neurosis?

FSP: "That is right" (Perls in Dolliver et al., 1980, p. 137). "Guilt (and resentment) ... both pervade all neurosis ... Anxiety is the neurotic symptom par excellence" (Perls et al., 1951, p.150).

JCO: What about something like anger and aggression?

FSP: "The supermarket made us forget that we kill in order to survive" (Clements, 1968, p. 69). "Aggression is essential for survival ... Nature is not so wasteful as to create such a powerful energy as aggression just to be 'got rid of' or 'abreacted'" (Perls, 1953-54 p. 48). "If we prevent ourselves from aggressing, we feel resentment or guilt instead ... it is not aggression itself that is good or bad, but when we feel bad we feel aggressive" (Perls, 1953-54, p. 52).

JCO: But most mature adults have learned to suppress feelings of anger and despair.

FSP: "This is quite true" (Perls, in Dolliver, 1991, p. 302). "Consequently, in Gestalt therapy we draw the patient's attention to his avoidance of any unpleasantness" (Perls, 2012, p. 191).

JCO: Even painful emotions are natural?

FSP: "That's correct" (Perls, 1969b, p. 117). "Nature creates emotions as a means of relating" (Perls, 1970a, p. 31). "Emotions are the very means of our ability to make contact" (Perls, 1978a, p. 62). "Nothing blocks contact as much as uncommunicated emotion" (Perls, 2012, p. 177). "Emotions do not have to be explained, much less interpreted. They are the very language of the organism" (Perls, 1978b, p. 52). "Your emotional experience ... is understood to not be a threat to rational control of your life but a guide" (Perls et al., 1951, p. 117). "Emotions ... are the way we become aware of the appropriateness of our concerns: the way the world is for us" (Perls et al., 1951, pp. 477-478).

JCO: So, the therapist should ignore what the client is thinking to focus on emotions?

FSP: "No, no, no, no" (Perls in Bry,

1972, p. 62). “Emotion ... is not mediated by thoughts and verbal judgments, but is immediate” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 112). “Once we isolate thinking from feeling, judgement from intuition ... verbal from non-verbal, we lose the self, the essence of existence, and we become either frigid human robots or confused neurotics” (Perls, 1953-54, p. 45).

JCO: What advice do you have for bringing emotions into therapy?

FSP: “Be real ... no more intellectualizing” (Perls in Bry, 1972, p. 59). “We avoid the bland, intellectualized ‘about-isms’ and strive vigorously to give all material the impact of immediacy” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 2). “Instead of telling a story, we tell a drama and we do it simply by changing the past tense into the present tense” (Perls, 1973, p. 179). “The therapist becomes almost cold-blooded and asks him to deliberately remain with whatever psychic pain [he] has at that moment ... to help the patient to distinguish between that which he imagines and that which he perceives” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 10).

JCO: How do you accomplish this goal?

FSP: “The Gestalt technique demands of the patient ... that he experience himself as fully as he can in the here and now” (Perls, 1973, p. 63). “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 analyst should not put pressure on the patient and persuade him to talk, but should attend to the resistances and avoidances” (Perls, 1969c, p. 74). “Often, however, the patient will escape from experiencing the present. He will go into the past or the future ... the past is of significance only as far as it embodies unfinished situations” (Perls, 1979, p.

14). “He must realize that if his past problems were really past, they would no longer be problems – and they certainly would not be present” (Perls, 1973, p. 63).

JCO: I feel that some clients find it useful to discuss their past.

FSP: “Psychoanalysis fosters the infantile state by considering that the past is responsible for the illness” (Perls, 1969a, p. 59). “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 that it is now their own responsibility to remedy their shortcomings, whatever they may be” (Perls, 1969c, p. 208).

JCO: So therapy helps clients to become responsible adults?

FSP: “Exactly. I’m responsible only for myself” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 71). “The essence of a grown-up person is to be able to take responsibility for himself” (Perls, 1969a, p. 79). “We have a certain freedom ... a freedom of choice” (Perls, 1978b, p. 53). “Without taking full responsibility ... no cure is possible” (Perls, 1969c, p. 217).

JCO: Some of my clients struggle because of events that happened during their childhood.

FSP: “No more unearthing of any childhood trauma will ever cure any neurosis. This has to be done in the here and now by reorganizing the structure and functions of our patients” (Perls, 2012, p. 172).

JCO: I have found that discussing childhood events can trigger strong emotions in therapy.

FSP: “Exactly” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 71). “We often gossip about people when we have not been able

to handle directly the feelings they have aroused in us” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 5). “Never gossip about any person who is not present” (Perls, 1970a, p. 36). “The no gossiping rule is designed to promote feelings and prevent avoidance of feelings” (Levitsky & Perls, 1970, p. 5).

JCO: So how do you manage these emotions from past events?

FSP: “The present includes a childhood experience if it is vividly remembered” (Perls, 1948, p. 576). “By making the patient go back, as if travelling in a Wellsian time engine, to the place and time of the past” (Perls, 2012, p. 28). “Bring the absent one into an encounter by having the speaker play both roles” (Perls, 1970a, p. 36). “If a patient is finally able to close the book on his past problems, he must close it in the present” (Perls in O’Leary, 1992, p. 53).

JCO: Then clients need to describe their traumatic events in session?

FSP: “No, there is more to it” (Perls, 1970a, p. 25). “It is not enough to bring up undigested material; it also has to be re-chewed so that the digestive process can be completed” (Perls, 1948, p. 582). “The therapist keeps leading the patient back to that which he wishes to avoid” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 166). “The ‘stay with it’ technique encourages the patient to undertake a similar ‘chewing up’ and painstaking assimilation of emotional experiences which have hitherto been unpleasant to the taste, difficult to swallow and impossible to digest” (Levitsky & Perls, 1979, p. 11).

JCO: What about clients who have suffered from a major loss or a traumatic event?

FSP: “Traumatic neuroses are essentially patterns of defence that originate in an attempt by the individual to protect himself from a

thoroughly terrifying ... clash with the environment” (Perls, 1973, p. 31). “In defending himself against this situation, the child is likely to develop rigid patterns of behaviour. And these may persist long after the danger is past. They were called into action by a trauma, but they continue to operate even when the trauma itself has disappeared” (Perls, 1973, p. 32).

JCO: So how do you help clients overcome a traumatic event?

FSP: “Gestalt therapy is an experiential therapy ... We ask our patients not to talk about their traumas and their problems in the removed area of the past tense and memory, but to re-experience their problems and their traumas ... in the here and now” (Perls, 1973, p. 63). “All therapy has to be done and can only be done in the now” (Perls, 1970b, p. 17).

JCO: So, a person gets over their fears by confronting their fears?

FSP: “Not only that. I go a step further” (Perls in Clements, 1968, p. 70). “It is not the conflict ... that

causes the misery, but the avoidance of bringing the fight into the open and clearing the air” (Perls, 1953-54, p. 51). “Avoidance as the main characteristic of neurosis ... its correct opposite is concentration ... Psychotherapy means assisting the patient in facing those facts which he hides from himself” (Perls, 1969c, p. 189). “He must return to ‘unfinished business’ which he left unfinished in the past because it was so painful that he had to flee. Now, if he is encouraged to go back and finish it, it is still painful; it reactivated his misery” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 164). “The therapist actually expects one to do hard work and undergo pain ... Therapy involves concentrated doses of what one sought to be relieved of” (Perls et al., 1951, pp. 165-166).

JCO: This sounds like prolonged exposure therapy?

FSP: “I partly don’t follow you ... I don’t know enough of it from the little I have understood” (Perls, 1969a, p. 21).

JCO: Some forms of therapy expect clients to confront their fears, tell their story, and relive their trauma.

FSP: “That is correct” (Perls, 1969b, p. 171). “All this is so obvious. I am rather embarrassed to mention it at all” (Perls, 1969b, p. 46). “What time is it?” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 510). “I usually have a cigarette break after 20 minutes” (Perls, 1969b, p. 183).

JCO: Maybe we should stop for the day and finish our discussion later?

FSP: “Okay. Thank you” (Perls, 1973, p. 153). “Come back once more” (Perls, 1973, p. 132). ☾

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