

When Life Shifts: Life-changing events and their therapeutic value

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Life-Changing Events

Life-Changing Events - Significant experiences that alter life trajectory, worldview, identity, or daily functioning.

Positive Events

Positive growth: after trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)

Marriage & well-being: Boosts happiness short-term; long-term effects are modest (Lucas et al., 2003)

Retirement: Can bring stress or growth depending on support & finances

Negative Events

Bereavement: ~90% experience the loss of a loved one by age 60 (Stroebe et al., 2017)

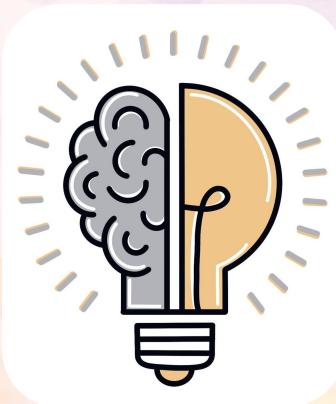
Trauma exposure: WHO → 70% experience at least one traumatic event; ~30% experience 4+
PTSD: Lifetime prevalence 5–6%; up to 15–20% in war survivors, refugees, or victims of violence

Developmental models (brief overview)

Freud

- Psychosexual stages
- Unresolved conflicts
- Fixations

(Freud, 1962/1975)



Piaget

- Cognitive development
- Sensorimotor, symbolic thought, logical thinking, abstract thinking
- Till age 12+

(Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014)

Erikson

- Psychosocial stages
- Identity crises

(Erikson, 1950/1977; Erikson, 1959; Erikson, 1968; Erikson, & Erikson, 1997)

Change - create & destroy creative adjustments

Human organism & environment unity
Transitions require flexible contacting
(Francesetti, & Roubal, 2013)

Healthy/unhealthy → normal/majority
(Hostrup, 2014)

Field - the what and when of life events
We don't always have control over stressors, but are put on the person by the system



School enrolment age - difference

Malta - 5 (Year 1)

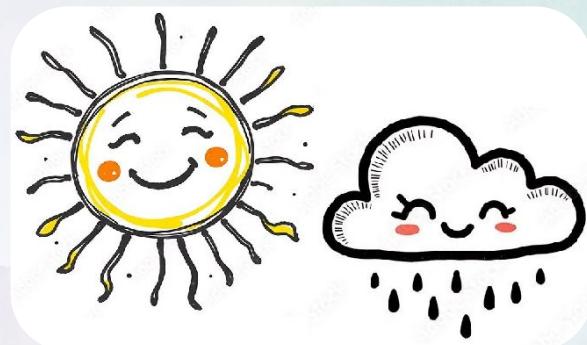
Poland - 6

Hungary - 6/7



Pre-operational → concrete operational
(logical rules, problem solving)

Aligned school system - being 1-2 years older or younger when starting school may shape how a child experiences the transition, including how challenging or stressful it feels.



Cycle of experience - need fulfilment - emerging needs - foreground/background

Ideally we move through the cycle gracefully, with awareness / no unaware interruptions, with supporting flexible creative adjustments
(Mann, 2021)

Move through the cycle - organismic energy accompanies contact

Excitement - energy, movement through the cycle is supported, mobilised, organised figure/ground relations

Anxiety - uncontained, unsupported energy, organismic energy turns into tension, inhibition, disturbed figure/ground formation
(PHG, 1994)



Experiencing Life-Changing Events in the Contact Cycle



- The contact cycle: how we meet & process an experience.
- The way a person moves through this cycle varies on factors such as **past experiences & unfinished business** (PHG, 1951), **personality & temperament** e.g., tolerance of uncertainty (Yontef, 1993), **support systems** such as family, workplace & wider community (Wheeler, 1998), **cultural factors** such as norms around change (Parlett, 1991) and **personal history**-including one's past traumas (van der Kolk, 2014)

Cycle of experience

Sensation - Awareness - Mobilization - Action - Final contact - Satisfaction - Withdrawal
(Clarkson & Cavicchia, 2014)

Marriage (positive, planned)

Loss (negative, unexpected)

Winning the lottery (positive? unexpected)



Life-changing events **interrupt the cycle** because they disrupt the organism–environment balance, create anxiety, trigger unfinished business & outdated creative adjustments, and outstretch the individual's available resources (PHG, 1951)

- **Resistance** may therefore, be an attempt to maintain support when external support is lacking (Wheeler, 1998), or a coping strategy that was once functional and has now become rigid and/or dysfunctional (Clarkson, 1989)



Introjects the past influencing our present

Rigidity ↔ Way of learning

Revisiting & revising introjects are important to lift blocks,
and create new, healthier ways of relating
(PHG, 1994)

Presence of cultural stereotypes
(Clarkson, & Cavicchia, 2014)



What Supports Us Through Life-Changing Events?

→ External sources of support

Workplace policies: compassionate leave, flexibility, therapy services

Social support: family, friends, community groups

Professional support: psychiatric & mental health services, among others

→ Internal resources - how can you support yourself?

Self-regulation - a shift from the cognitive to the embodied; internal support

develops through reconnecting to bodily awareness (Kepner, 1987)

Grounding techniques; embodiment practices help anchor awareness & regulate

anxiety (Yontef & Jacobs, 2011)



Gestalt's view on Anxiety

Anxiety tends to arise in transitions - this is because all change, whether positive or negative, creates uncertainty.

From a Gestalt perspective, fear & anxiety are viewed as “excitement without breath” (Perls, 1969); and so if it is inherently a positive force, how may we support this so that it doesn’t rob us of the excitement?

Therapy supports clients to stay with anxiety and transform it into excitement or an energy for change (Polster & Polster, 1973)



Anxiety - excitement polarity

Continuum & spectrum of positions in between
(Brownell, 2010)

Stuck, immobilised
energy, block



Movement, action
oriented, organised
energy, contact

All experiences are necessary and
important → anxiety

Awareness and balance are key
(Joyce, & Sills, 2014)



Functional & Dysfunctional Coping Styles

Adaptive creative adjustments build resilience and promote flexibility; functional coping styles include the integration of awareness, choice & authentic contact (Nevis, 2000; Wheeler, 1998)

When creative adjustments lack Awareness & Fluidity → they prevent genuine contact
(Clarkson, 1989)

Life changing events may trigger old coping styles – so what once was a protective behaviour to manage overwhelming feelings, may become a dysfunctional pattern.



Example: Retroflection (turning energy inwards)

Behaviors (in life-changing events)

Blame, criticism on the self, psychosomatic issues, control, self-harm

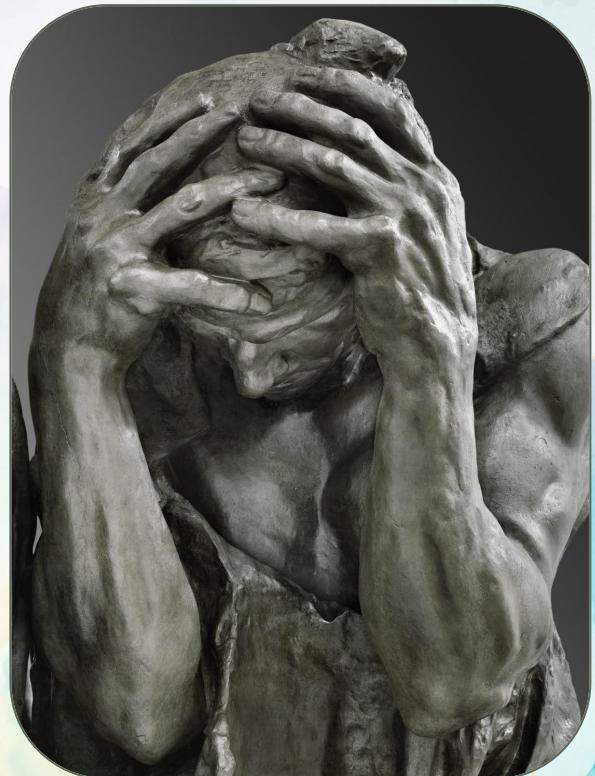
Gestalt Interventions:

Body awareness, expression of anger & exploration of unfinished business

Therapeutic Aim:

Transform: self-directed energy → outward expression

(Mann, 2021)



Awareness in itself is healing - F. Perls



Awareness and behavior - The Contradiction

Real life shows that awareness alone is often not enough.

For example:

- ❖ Recognize toxic relationship → stay in it
- ❖ Know smoking is harmful → still smoke
- ❖ See binge eating is harmful → continue



GESTALT THERAPY - blocks to awareness

For example:

- ❖ Introjects (swallowed messages)
- ❖ Polarities (part wants change, part resists)
- ❖ Unfinished business (unprocessed emotions or avoiding pain)
- ❖ Creative adjustment (old patterns that once helped, now limit)
- ❖ Figure-ground formation (underlying need remains unmet)



Change - addictions

Cognitive awareness alone \neq change.

Real change needs:

- ❖ Awareness in the present moment:
 - ❖ Emotional + cognitive integration (neuroscience perspective)
 - ❖ Repetition of new experiences (inside and outside therapy)
- ❖ Supportive therapeutic relationship
- ❖ Field perspective

(Pecotic, 2018; Yontef & Fuhr, 2005; Damasio, 1994; Damasio, 1999)

Neuroscience Perspective

Why Change Feels Hard:

1. Two Systems at Work (cognitive and emotional systems)
2. Body Memory and Embodiment
3. Rational Awareness is Limited
4. Repetition in safe contexts (practice builds new neural pathways)

Cognitive awareness ≠ action → body memory & emotional systems hold strong sway

The intention to change is a cognitive act, but habits are emotional and embodied (Damasio, 1994; Damasio, 1999)



Supportive therapeutic relationship

1. Therapist and client co-create change in the relationship

2. Resistance

“Resistance is not something to be eliminated. It is a meaningful part of the contact boundary and the personality function.”

(Yontef, 1993)

3. Paradoxical Theory of Change

“Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not.”

(Beisser, 2003)



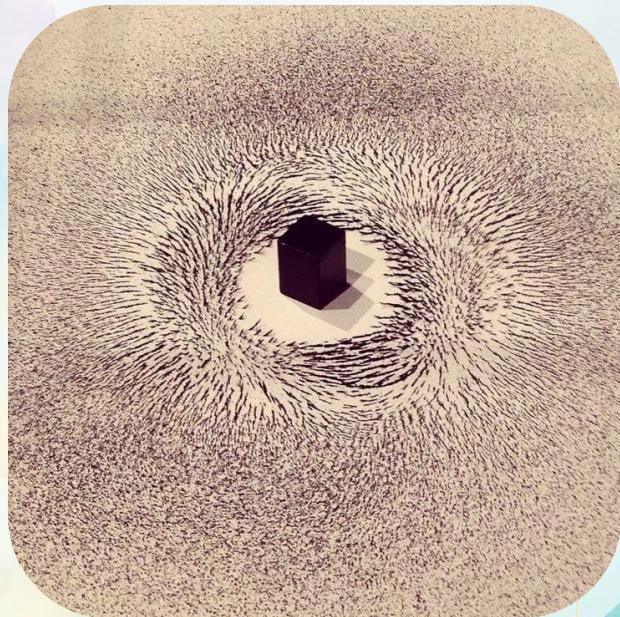
The Field Perspective

“No one exists in isolation. The self is a function of the field – relational, temporal, and fluid.”

(Jacobs, 2004)

Change is not only a question of willpower → it depends on:

- ❖ relational dynamics,
- ❖ environment (e.g., changing social circles in addiction)
- ❖ history
- ❖ power structures



Personality and Change

Addictions become part of personality functioning

True change requires:

- a. Awareness (cognitive)
- b. Embodied experience (emotional/body memory)
- c. Supportive relationship
- d. A changing field



In conclusion, Gestalt therapy invites us to stay with the felt sense, engage with resistance, and experiment in the here-and-now, to create meaning and embrace change

“If nothing changes, nothing changes.”

-Courtney C. Stevens
The Lies About Truth

Thank you.



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