

Q & A with Anna

What is Gestalt therapy and how does it help people?

Many of us struggle with competing feelings or parts that are constantly in conflict with one another. A self-critical side, an insecure side, a perfectionistic side, a warm and cuddly side, an introverted side, it can get pretty noisy in our minds and even distressing at times.

Gestalt therapy is an approach founded by Fritz and Laura Perls in the 1940s as an alternative to traditional psychoanalysis. Gestalt means whole and the approach sees the entire person as if they are fragmented into "parts." Our work in therapy is to reintegrate the fragments by getting in touch with your needs through awareness, embodiment, and looking at how you repeat patterns. We investigate your needs in the mix of all of this. The benefit for patients is that integration helps them feel more connected and alive.

You bring your entire history to therapy. The therapeutic relationship is really like a laboratory to look at yourself and your decisions. In sessions, I help clients become aware of the present moment. The more you're able to accept what's happening in the now the easier it is to integrate that into the whole of your life's experience.

Gestalt therapy emphasizes the relationship between the therapist and the client. I encourage my patients to talk about how they feel physically and mentally in the moment and how that moment may change as I bear witness to it.

You are both a Gestalt therapist and an Iyengar Yoga Teacher. How did you get involved in these two disciplines?

When my college art teacher casually got a group of students together to practice yoga, I was in and loved it! Yoga felt like a way to meet my body where it is, connect, and learn about myself by noticing my thoughts through the practice. It was the first time I did a physical practice that was about accepting myself and working with where I was in the poses. This was a big learning for me as my mind was always striving to be better and to do more.

After college, I continued my yoga practice which led to my teacher training at the Iyengar Institute of NYC. Iyengar yoga is an approach founded by BKS Iyengar that focuses on alignment, sequencing, and classical poses to achieve overall health, well-being, and grounding.

As for Gestalt, I remember feeling directionless after college and went into treatment with a Gestalt therapist. She was honest about her struggles, never acting like she couldn't relate to my experience. Her vulnerability inspired and encouraged me. This type of therapy helped me build confidence and self-esteem. It also helped me discover I wanted to become a Gestalt therapist myself.

Do Gestalt therapy and Iyengar yoga have things in common?

Absolutely. Iyengar yoga focuses on the individual and how to create more space in the body and live in a more integrated way. This goes hand-in-hand with Gestalt Psychotherapy as the body is the house of our emotions. Both approaches focus on the entire person not just the mind for health.

For me, Iyengar yoga and Gestalt therapy are creative as there is an aim or goal in the work, either a pose or a life goal, but the focus is on paying attention to yourself, your body's cues, and working with exactly where you presently are before moving forward. Both approaches are deeply rooted in philosophy, which I appreciate, but are both simultaneously practical and accessible for all people.

As a therapist, when I bring someone's attention to their shallow breath, they tend to start to regulate it. When I bring attention to how someone tightens their shoulders when they talk about a family member, they notice it and then have the awareness to soften. Yoga and Gestalt are both like investigative processes into the body, mind, and breath.

So, you're not asking clients to stand on their heads during a therapy session?

No. But I often bring attention to the body, the breath, or a gesture in sessions. For example, when a client holds their breath every time they express anger toward their partner, while this isn't a yoga pose, it is a way the person begins to physically constrict their body during an emotion. I don't make meaning about this but rather, I bring the client's attention to it, and we stay and explore the feeling and emotion and what other feelings and emotions may be there under the surface. Similarly in yoga, as a teacher, I instruct people into challenging poses and we hold them and explore the feelings in the body.

Can you tell us about the body-mind approach to therapy and what kinds of issues benefit from it?

Our body is constantly giving us signals about what feels good, what feels bad, and everything in between. Staying in touch with those signals helps you know what is right for you. For example, many people have trouble making decisions. The moment they make one, they change their mind. When we're able to drop awareness into our body we can actually feel what comes up when grappling with a decision. If you can stay with the feeling, it reveals what is the better decision for you.

A body-mind approach is also really effective if you feel stuck repeating some behavior or pattern in your life that isn't serving you. For example, maybe you isolate as a way to avoid rejection, this tactic may work for a while but the fallout becomes feeling lonely. So there's a need to connect with people under that behavior that wants to be addressed.

We all feel indecisive or stuck sometimes. I know I do. When I work with individuals and couples to discover what is going on in their mind and body they are better able to identify their needs and break old emotional patterns.

You work with a lot of couples. Any suggestions about how to address conflicts when they come up?

Sure. A lack of sharing vulnerable feelings and speaking intimately is often the missing piece that leads to arguments, fighting, and blame. It can be very challenging to stay present in the middle of a conflict, particularly when our partner presses buttons that trigger us from our past. So working to identify how you get triggered helps couples find new ways to communicate with each other. Therapy is of course a great way for couples to work on their communication.

I've been in a relationship for a long time. So when couples come to me I understand that thing your partner does that pisses you off, or that attribute that originally turned you on but now annoys you. It isn't easy when resentments and past hurts build. But time and time again, when couples start to really listen, be present, and get curious about each other, they strengthen their foundation and feel like they aren't alone.

Why do creative professionals get a lot out of Gestalt therapy?

So much about Gestalt therapy celebrates creativity and the many ways we learn to adjust to our environments. Sessions emphasize the here-and-now present moment and value the ways people express themselves. Gestalt therapy is all about not knowing what's going to happen and learning how to support yourself in the present moment. That's why it's so great for creative people who are generally open to the process of exploration and possibility.

In my practice, I often work with artists, actors, and people in creative fields. Therapy is our little lab of exploration, separate from any formal creative training. An unscripted dive into how the person relates to themselves and me during our time together. I get to dive in with the client which always makes the work fresh and new!

As a New Yorker what advice do you have for stressed-out city dwellers?

I'm a born and raised New Yorker, so I'm definitely aware of how hard it can be to lead a life in this city, let alone a more balanced life. But it is possible! There is so much stimulation here, and some people really enjoy it! For those who thrive on that energy, that is great! I have had to find a balance of both being outward as well as creating quiet time for myself.

People often hook into the striving mentality of constantly wanting more and not stopping along the way to confirm this is still what they want. I have been there and there is a time for striving. But with this forward state of mind, you tend to miss the present.

The other extreme I notice living in New York is it can foster the "I'm not doing enough" state of mind which can result in feeling depressed and anxious. The more grounded and confident your state of mind, the more freedom you have to make decisions from a space of clarity rather than pressure. Whether it's therapy, meditation, or a simple walk in the park, find some way to bring your attention back to yourself so you can explore and get connected to what you really want.