Incorporating Gestalt Psychotherapy in Your Oncology Practice with Skill and Passion

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Outline of Presentation
- Introduction
- Brief history of Gestalt and theoretical concepts
- Gestalt and Oncology Social Work
- Case examples
- Conclusion and questions

Introduction
- Work in outpatient academic cancer center in NYC
- Certified Gestalt Psychotherapist
- Private practice
Gestalt Psychotherapy

- Relational and non-authoritarian
- Experiential and present-centered
- Humanistic and non-pathologizing
- Uses the sensation of the body as a foundation for connecting to moment-to-moment experience

The objective of Gestalt is to help clients become more authentic, fully alive and integrated by helping them process blocks or unfinished business that interfere with fulfillment, success and growth (Zinker, 1977)

Developed by Laura and Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s and continues to evolve

- Fritz Perls was a neuropsychiatrist who studied with both Freud and Wilhelm Reich. Laura was a psychologist who worked with brain damaged soldiers from WW I, knew about dance, Feldenkrais and Alexander Technique body work. Paul Goodman was a writer and philosopher. (Yontef, 1993)
The word "gestalt" is derived from the German word meaning "whole" and the whole is more than the sum of its parts. (Perls, et al., 1951)

It was influenced by existential philosophy, bio-energetics, holism, Eastern philosophies and psychoanalysis. (Yontef, 1993)

Gestalt's non-authoritarian, relational approach and emphasis on the "here and now" techniques matched the radical cultural changes in the 1960s and 70s. (Miller, 1989)

Psychoanalytic Theory vs. Gestalt

- Psychoanalytic theory: sex and aggression are primary drives and client is dependent on the analyst for interpretation.
- Gestalt theory: basic human drive is self-actualization and the client defines his/her own meaning from their experience. (Congress, 1996)

Gestalt Concepts

- Figure/ Ground
- Contact Boundary, Fluid and Fixed
- Therapeutic Relationship
- Parts Theory
- Paradoxical Theory of Change
- Body Awareness
Figure/ Ground

- Concept is based on Gestalt psychology theory about human perception and is a fluid process (Perls et al., 1951).
- The figure is what is in the forefront of awareness and the most meaningful / pressing in the moment.
- Ground is made of all that is not figural or what is not in focus.
- In a healthy person, there is a natural and spontaneous flow between figure formation and destruction and it is constantly changing if you bring awareness to it. (Perls et al., 1951; Clarkson, 1999)

Contact Boundary

- Contact describes how we meet the world, how two people connect to each other or even how one part of a person meets another part of themselves. (Perls et al., 1951)
- It is a creative and dynamic process that enables us to fulfill needs that arise and respond to the environment.
- A healthy contact boundary is permeable enough to permit interactions but firm enough to establish a sense of autonomy. (Yontef, 1993)

Therapeutic Relationship

- Martin Buber first described the I-Thou relationship as the healing relationship that is possible as a result of the meeting of two people at the contact boundary (Buber, 1996).
- Each client and therapist develops a unique relationship which is authentic, non-judgmental, and co-created. (Kirchner, 2000)
- “... client and counselor exchange many moments of recognition of each other's real humanity...both participants engage in a relationship of mutuality where not only the client is changed by the counselor, but the counselor is also affected and changed by the client.” (Clarkson, 1999)
Parts Theory and Polarities

- In Gestalt Psychotherapy, the goal is to reclaim lost parts of ourselves and to become more whole. (Perls, et al., 1951)
- Parts theory: patients are encouraged to express and experience multiple parts of themselves, in order to accept and come to a deeper understanding of their presenting problems.
- Two or more opposing views, behaviors, forces, or "parts of self" are not seen as "either-or" but part of the same whole - a continuum of choices.

One well known method to aid in the exploration of different parts or conflict with others is the empty chair technique, a concept that was originally from Jacob Moreno’s Psychodrama but made famous by Perls. (Paivio & Greenberg, 1995; Kellogg, 2004)

- In order for someone to change, they have to accept "what is".
- The more someone tries to be something they are not, the more they will stay the same.
- Change is an organic process that is a result of organismic growth.
Body Awareness

- Gestalt therapy stresses the wholeness of human experience and does not separate between mind, body, emotion, actions or thoughts.
  (Perls et al, 1951, Kempner, 2001)

- Our sense of reality is based on our contact with our senses and awareness of our bodies. We have senses that are oriented towards our mental sense of self and senses oriented towards our relationship to the environment.
  (Kempner, 2000)

- Being aware of bodily sensations helps us experience being grounded in the moment.
  (Perls et al, 1951)

- Emotions can be expressed through physical expressions.
  (Dohm, 2000; Kepner, 1987; Perls et al, 1951)

- Staying with a patient’s bodily experience can allow for the emergence of their emotions and help to free blockages of energy from past traumas and experiences.
  (Shapiro et al, 2006)

SW Practice and Gestalt

- Both SW and Gestalt Psychotherapy begin where the client is and follow what emerges.

- Figure/ground is similar to SW focus on person-in-environment ecological theory.

- Both focus on the whole person in a non-judgmental way.

- Both SW and Gestalt have the goal of increasing self-awareness of both client and therapist.
  (Congress, 1996)
Impact of Cancer Diagnosis

- Cancer patients face complex physical, psychological, social and spiritual consequences of their disease and treatment, and Social Workers often provide the primary support (Wells & Turney, 2001; Black, 1989).
- Cancer patients often experience dramatic changes in their bodies and sense of self, anxiety and depression (Cwikel & Behar, 1999).
- A cancer diagnosis is a crisis for most patients and family members and often disrupts the patient’s work, family relationships and individual identity (Cwikel & Behar, 1999; Black, 1989).

Oncology SW Role

- Oncology Social Workers provide support to patients through this extremely difficult time of their lives.
- Social work interventions include crisis counseling, cognitive behavioral techniques and being a supportive witness to patient and caregiver experiences.
- The ability to establish a rapid therapeutic connection with these vulnerable patients is the most important short-term intervention.

Case Examples

- We all do amazing work with people at their most vulnerable moments and we could all tell stories like the ones I will share now. I have so much respect for our patients, this work and all of you.
- These case examples demonstrate how using the Gestalt techniques of focusing on the present and attending to what emerges in the moment can help oncology patients come to a deeper understanding of their experiences and help facilitate the adjustment process.
June S.
- June is a 38 year old Japanese woman with Breast CA and had a recent reconstruction surgery
- SW paged when Pt was at MD office for first post-surgical appointment
- Pt was very emotional and panicked

Gestalt Intervention:
- Using Gestalt techniques of helping her connect to her body and supporting her in the moment-to-moment experience helped her get in touch with what was emerging
- Body sensations revealed emotions and “unfinished business” which we processed

Felicia R.
- Felicia is a 55 year old Filipino woman with Breast CA recurrence 12 years after initial diagnosis
- Her husband had been very supportive the first time but they were no longer together and this deepened her sense of loss and despair
- She repeated several times “I don’t have a home”
Gestalt Intervention

- Utilizing the empty chair technique to work through some of her feelings related to her husband
- Helping Pt connect to her breath and body she was able to reconnect to herself in a new way – new sense of “home”

James K.

- James is a 42 year old African American man with new Colon CA diagnosis
- Co-worker told SW that someone was extremely upset and crying in the hallway and needed help

Gestalt Intervention

- SW helped establish I-Thou moment of therapeutic contact when he was in despair
Conclusion

- Helping patients focus on the present and working with what emerges in the moment in a non-authoritarian and relational approach, including the sensation of the body and the awareness of our many parts can be a beneficial intervention.
- This method can provide clinicians with another framework to assist oncology patients as they cope with diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship.
- It lends itself to short-term interventions that can be easily utilized by oncology social workers with appropriate knowledge and training in this theoretical approach.

QUESTIONS?

References