

Applying Gestalt Therapy to Address Unresolved Emotional Distress: A Case Study

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Abstract *This study discusses the application of Gestalt Therapy in addressing unresolved emotional distress in a young female client. The client presented with persistent self-blame, emotional avoidance, and the belief that healing was dependent on external justice. A qualitative case study design was employed across nine counselling sessions. Gestalt techniques such as the empty chair, symbolic writing, and emotional awareness worksheets were used to promote awareness, emotional ownership, and personal responsibility. Findings revealed that the client shifted from avoidance to ownership of emotions, developed coping strategies, and constructed a self-support plan. The study underscores the importance of structured, phased, and readiness-sensitive interventions when working with clients experiencing unresolved emotional distress.*

Keywords

Gestalt Therapy, Emotional Awareness, Self-Blame, Symbolic Technique

Introduction and Research Problem

Emotional loneliness, self-blame, and dependence on external factors are common challenges among trauma clients. A young female client, presented with unresolved emotional distress arising from an invalidating family environment, physical punishment, and a betrayal of trust by a school warden. These experiences shaped her belief that healing could only occur once justice was served. Three main issues were identified, namely emotional avoidance, internalized self-blame, and unsafe coping strategies such as self-harm, patterns often linked to unresolved needs for validation (Jacobs, 1992). This study is significant as it explores how Gestalt Therapy can be applied in the context of trauma to shift clients from projection to ownership of emotions and from avoidance to awareness.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach. A total of nine counselling sessions were conducted by a trainee counsellor. The therapeutic process was structured within the Gestalt Therapy framework, emphasizing the principles of unfinished business, present awareness, and personal responsibility (Corey, 2012). Three core techniques were applied: (1) the empty chair technique, which enabled the client to interact with significant figures such as her father, the warden, and her younger self, (2) the Now I Feel worksheet, which enhanced awareness of present emotions, and (3) symbolic writing, which integrated emotions through letters written to herself. Data were collected from session transcripts, observation notes, and counsellor reflections, and were analyzed thematically based on the Gestalt conceptual model by Šromová and Roubal (2022).

Findings and Discussion

Therapeutic progress unfolded in phases. In the early sessions, the client remained bound by self-blame and emotional silence. During the middle sessions, the empty chair technique facilitated the release of long-suppressed anger and sadness. In the later sessions, the emotional awareness worksheet helped the client identify authentic emotions, while symbolic writing supported the release of self-blame. In the final session, the client developed a self-support plan that included relapse prevention strategies, social support, and gratitude practices. The findings confirm that symbolic and structured interventions are effective for clients who struggle to express emotions directly (Cohen, 2003). These outcomes are consistent with Gestalt's unfinished business theory, which posits that unresolved experiences disrupt present functioning until they are integrated (Dsouza, 2025). Client demonstrated a shift from an external locus of control, where healing was dependent on justice, to an internal locus of control, where she took ownership of her healing.

Conclusion, Implications and Significance

This study demonstrates that Gestalt Therapy is effective in supporting trauma clients who struggle with self-blame and emotional avoidance. Three implications were identified. First, the practical implication is that counsellors should adapt symbolic techniques for clients who tend to avoid emotional expression (Cheung & Nguyen, 2012). Second, the training implication is that trainee counsellors must be prepared to identify unfinished business and pace interventions appropriately. Third, the theoretical implication is that this case reinforces the role of Gestalt Therapy in integrating awareness, responsibility, and emotional ownership as the foundation of healing (Šromová & Roubal, 2022). Overall, although healing is non-linear, small changes such as acknowledging emotions and rejecting self-blame can lead to meaningful transformation.

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