

CHAPTER 2

2 THE USE OF THE GESTALT THEORY IN A STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Gestalt Theory as a theoretical framework emphasises the fact that healthy behaviour occurs once people reach a point where they can regulate their emotional state. When this comes about, people experience a feeling of unity and integration in their lives (Thompson and Rudolph, 1992:110). It is also concerned with the total existence of a human being. The people are addressed as whole and integrated beings, who strive to gain balance in an ever-changing environment. The Gestalt theory is holistic and can form the theoretical framework for work with any type of individual and has been used effectively with individuals, groups and in teaching (Congress, 1995:1121). The Gestalt Theory is praised for its immediacy, directness and its resourcefulness (Robinson, 1991:1). Awareness is created by bringing people into contact with the present and helping them to take responsibility for their behaviour and their lives.

The Gestalt Theory has definite theoretical concepts which can be used successfully to form guidelines in a stress management programme. People who experience stress often feel that they have lost control over their lives. They cannot regulate the state that they are in and very seldom take responsibility for what they are experiencing. People often blame the environment, other people, their work or their own inability and, therefore, relinquish control over their lives. With the Gestalt Theory as frame of reference, people are

encouraged to make choices and to take responsibility for those choices and ultimately grow towards maturity and self regulation. It also focuses on the cognitive and emotional totality of each person, each moment and during each situation (Clarkson, 1989:1).

This chapter will define Gestalt, explore the background of the Gestalt Theory, and give insight on the theoretical concepts of the Gestalt Theory, therapeutic techniques used in Gestalt therapy and the types of dysfunction that can occur when the corporate employee's Gestalt is out of balance. The principles of the Gestalt Theory can be used effectively in a stress management programme. With the use of these principles the corporate employees have the opportunity to understand themselves better and to become more aware of how their own behaviour plays a role in their stress levels.

2.2 BACKGROUND TO THE GESTALT THEORY

Fredirick (Fritz) Perls was the founder of the Gestalt Theory. He received a medical degree from the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in 1921 and thereafter continued his training in psychoanalysis. In 1933 he was forced to flee Germany and he settled in Amsterdam until Nazism drove him to South Africa in 1935. He lived in South Africa for twelve years and many of the basic Gestalt concepts were formulated during this time. In 1946 he moved to the United States of America and set up a private practice and conducted Gestalt training workshops (Belkin, 1980:241).

Perls saw the human being as a whole, a unified organism with integrated mental, physical, emotional and sensory processes, that are expressed in the "here and now" (Glass, 1984:60). He was of the opinion that all actions were linked to people's emotions and thoughts and that they had control over those actions.

The Gestalt Theory was developed as an alternative to the Freudian Theory. Perls criticised Freud's approach that focused on the past. The Gestalt Theory focuses on the present in which people find themselves (Congress, 1995:1117). It arose from the existential-humanistic school of psychology, which portrays individuals optimistically, with the belief that people strive to achieve their full potential. Gestalt social workers are of the opinion that individuals freely choose their actions and are, therefore, responsible for their behaviour. Independence and uniqueness is emphasised in the Gestalt Theory. This was explained by Perls as moving away from environmental support and towards self-support (Beck, 1996:743).

The following section will look at the definition of Gestalt and the theoretical concepts that form the basis thereof.

2.3 DEFINING GESTALT

The word Gestalt is of German origin and roughly translates to the English word "pattern" or whole (Belkin, 1980:240). According to Glass (1984:60) Gestalt is defined as follows:

...means a configuration or whole, an entity which is more than the sum of it's parts.

Congress (1995:1117) suggests that Gestalt translates as whole and as total figure-ground configuration. These translations become relevant when the theoretical concepts are explained.

A gestalt was defined by English and English in Thompson & Rudolph (1992:109) as:

... a configuration or a totality that has, as a unified whole, properties which can not be derived by summation from the parts and their relationships.... It may refer to physical structures, to physiological and psychological functions or to symbolic units.

Perls in Belkin (1980:241) says the following about Gestalt:

The basic premise of the Gestalt Psychology is that human nature is organised into patterns or wholes, that it is experienced by the individual in these terms, and that it can only be understood as the function of the patterns of wholes of which it is made.

There are many different definitions for Gestalt and it would seem that these definitions do not always focus on the same aspects. The researcher is of the opinion that Gestalt refers to the whole person who is made up of different parts, and he/she needs to be aware of those different parts and strive towards homeostasis between each of the parts. This means that the person has to take responsibility for his/her own self regulation.

The Gestalt Theory underlines the following aspects:

- People tend to seek closure – if the Gestalt is incomplete it demands attention until homeostasis is acquired.
- People will complete Gestalts in accordance with their current need.
- A person's behaviour is a whole, which is greater than the sum of its specific parts.
- A person's behaviour can be meaningfully understood only in context.

- A person experiences the world in accordance to the principles of figure and ground (Passons, 1975:12 &13).

Although the figure and ground principle will be discussed in more detail later, Belkin (1980:241) explains it as follows:

... a healthy personality exists when a person's experiences form a meaningful whole, when there is a smooth transition between two sets of experiences that are immediately in the focus of awareness (what they term the figure) and those that are in the background (the ground)

The person's Gestalt is in tact when he/she is able to balance the different parts that form the Gestalt – the parts that form part of the foreground as well the background.

Corey in Robinson (1991:4) stated the following about Gestalt:

Gestalt is a form of existential therapy based on the premise that people must find their own way in life and accept personal responsibility if they hope to achieve maturity.

Furthermore, Robinson (1991:4) mentions that the basic goals of Gestalt are:

... for the clients to gain awareness of what they are experiencing and doing, and by becoming aware to take responsibility for what they are feeling, thinking and doing.

These goals form the basis of a stress management programme. People need to gain

awareness of what they are experiencing in their bodies and in their lives and how they are contributing to the reactions within their bodies and then they need to take responsibility for their feelings, thoughts and actions by making some changes in their lifestyles.

2.4 THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF THE GESTALT THEORY

The Gestalt Theory is built on the foundation of certain theoretical concepts. These concepts enable the individual to create a greater understanding of the theory. The decision to use the Gestalt Theory in a stress management programme for corporate employees stems from the fact that the Gestalt Theory emphasises homeostasis. Corporate employees will have to increase their levels of awareness to understand why they are feeling out of balance. Awareness is, therefore, the key concept of the theory as all the other aspects are grounded in this component.

2.4.1 Awareness

Awareness is a central theme in the Gestalt Theory. Perls (1951) states the following about awareness:

It is only through the recognition of your emotions that you can be aware, as a biological organism, either of what you are up against in the environment, or of what special opportunities are at the moment presented. It is only if you acknowledge and accept your longing for someone or something...that you obtain orientation for appropriate action (Greenberg, Rice and Elliott, 1993:39).

If people are not aware of what they do and what they feel, they cannot understand

or acknowledge any of their needs and feelings. They just function from day to day without confronting any difficult situation in their lives. Corporate employees who experience ongoing stress are often so pressurised by the general demands of life that they do not take time to live in the present moment. They are not fully aware of themselves and of their environment – so they just do what they have to do to survive.

Awareness is described by Polster and Polster (1973:211 - 212) as follows:

At its best awareness is a continuous means for keeping up to date with one's self. It is an ongoing process, readily available at all times, rather than an exclusive or sporadic illumination – like insight – only at a special moment or under special conditions.

Thus, awareness is a continuous process that is renewed with each moment. The individual's awareness should be facilitated in the "here and now". Awareness is the ability to focus, to give attention and to be in contact with the here and now (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:113).

An awareness continuum is not a purpose, but it can be a means to a goal. If people become more aware, they can determine how they lose awareness and how this process interferes with homeostasis. If awareness increases, they can become aware of unfinished business in their lives and work towards completing their fragmented Gestalt (compare Aronstam, 1989:63a & Van Wyk, 1984:25). According to Glass (1984:60), a continuing flow of needs and wishes come into awareness and each one of these can be thought of as a Gestalt. When people are functioning healthier, they are mobilised to meet each need by making contact with aspects in

the environment that are necessary to meet their needs. In this way homeostasis is achieved.

People should be aware of themselves as well as their environment. As children, human beings are aware of themselves and their surroundings. They have the ability to be aware and to grow but they are often taught that certain thoughts and behaviours are not acceptable and, therefore, they learn to suppress those thoughts and feelings. An example of this is when a boy is told that he is not allowed to cry because he is a boy. This could cause confusion and emotional blockage within the child and as an adult he may find it difficult to express his feelings. The Gestalt social worker should help people become more aware of their feelings and as internal and external awareness increases, emotional growth can take place (Congress, 1995:1119).

Awareness is one of the central themes of the Gestalt Theory. If the awareness of corporate employees increases, they will have a clearer understanding of the effect of unfinished business in their lives and how this can affect their stress levels. The corporate employees can function as whole integrated human beings if they are more aware of their feelings, behaviour and needs.

2.4.2 Wholeness

Wholeness is emphasised in the Gestalt Theory. There is no distinction between the mind and body or the thoughts and actions of people. They do not refer to feelings as separate from themselves – it is an integral part of them and should be viewed as such (Congress, 1995:1119). If people are not functioning as a whole, there is unfinished business in their lives or their Gestalt is out of balance. This

means that much of their energy is being spent on regaining their balance, instead of giving full attention and all their energy to meet needs (Thompson and Rudolph, 1992:113).

The researcher is of the opinion that wholeness is the opposite of the fragmented self. If the fragmented gestalt can become a whole, the corporate employee will experience homeostasis. This process is facilitated during a stress management programme by means of activities that enhance the employees' awareness.

Practical example:

If corporate employees are experiencing financial difficulty, they will focus more on their problem than on their work. This could affect their productivity and their relationships because they will use much more of their energy to solve the financial problem than for their work.

2.4.3 Homeostasis

The word homeostasis is often used interchangeably with balance or self regulation. For the purpose of this study reference will be made mainly to homeostasis. When people experience a fragmented Gestalt, they feel out of balance and their homeostasis is disrupted. This leads to the fact that people feel that their lives are out of control. Homeostasis can be described as the process whereby the organism retains balance during different circumstances (Aronstam, 1989:633). Self regulation or homeostasis can only be achieved if people have sufficient awareness. They have to be in touch with their feelings and their thoughts as they occur from moment to moment (Glass, 1984:60). Carmer and Rouzer in Belkin

(1980:242) take this idea further by stating the following:

...organism/environment - interaction, is regulated according to the principle of homeostasis. From a relative stage of equilibrium, needs arise which must be met to restore the balance.

People are continually striving to regain balance. If their needs are not being met, they are not in a state of equilibrium. Perls was of the opinion that self-regulation entailed that the people have to take responsibility for their own lives and behaviour. He held the belief that people have the capacity to regulate their own needs and to support themselves. This process is enhanced when self awareness is improved and the people can regain contact with themselves (Congress, 1995:1119).

Therefore, corporate employees who are experiencing ongoing stress may feel out of control. They do not experience homeostasis and they need to start regulating their own needs and take responsibility for their lives and their behaviour. This process can start with a stress management programme, whereby awareness and contact with themselves can be facilitated.

2.4.4 Unfinished Business

The Gestalt refers to the whole person or the person in totality. When there is unfinished business in people's lives, the Gestalt becomes fragmented. This means that these people have an incomplete Gestalt. People who have unfinished business cannot give their full attention to a specific situation because they have unfulfilled needs, unspoken needs or unfinished situations that colour their perceptions (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:111).

Robinson (1991:04) says the following about unfinished business:

The focus is on direct experience in the here and now; the past is only relevant as it affects the present, and closure, or the finishing of unfinished business, is crucial in the client's struggle to free themselves to live fully in the present.

Unfinished business needs to be addressed to allow people the energy to focus totally on the present. People become aware of unfinished business in their lives by enhancing their personal awareness. At times people do not even realise that their way of dealing with a situation is because of unfinished business in their past. When people's awareness levels increase they can complete the unfinished business in their lives and move on. One can often see how people project unfinished business onto the clay, sand or drawings when the play therapy mediums are being used. This can also be introduced in a stress management programme whereby the employees will be assisted to deal with their unfinished business.

2.4.5 Here and Now

The most important aspect to keep in mind when working with people from a Gestalt point of view is that awareness is facilitated in the present. They need to be in touch with the "here and now". Everything that is said should be related to the immediate present (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:113). According to Smith (in Congress, 1995:1119), the most fundamental concept of the Gestalt therapy is the focus on the here and now. With Gestalt the objective is primarily to increase self awareness and awareness of their environment at that given moment. There is no

reference to the past. Information about the people's past is shared during the course of the conversation without probing for it.

Awareness can only be focused on one situation at a time. If people are occupied with the past or the future, they cannot give their full attention to the here and now. Polster and Polster (1973) state the following about the "here and now":

... only the present exists now and... to stray from it distracts from the living quality of reality (Glass, 1984:60).

Furthermore Dierks (1999:56) states the following regarding the here and now:

...in a healthy, adult state, I have rational thoughts and feelings that are appropriate in the moment. It would take a lot to overwhelm me if I am in the moment with my feelings.

The objective of a stress management programme would include the enhancing of awareness in the here and now. Corporate employees should have the opportunity to increase their levels of awareness and to make changes that will enable them to move towards self-support instead of environmental dependency.

2.4.6 Figure-ground

The concept of figure-ground describes people in relation to their environment (Congress, 1995:1119). Belkin (1980:241) refers to the figure-ground dichotomy. This means that healthy personalities exist when people's experience forms a meaningful whole. If the transition between the figure experiences (what is in the

awareness) and the ground experiences (those that are in the background) takes place smoothly, people are seen to have healthy personalities (Belkin, 1980:241). Figure refers to what is on the foreground of people and ground refers to what is in the background.

According to O'Leary (1992:11), Gestalt forming and destruction entails:

A promise underlying the figure-ground principle is that the individual must be able to differentiate between more prominent stimuli in the surroundings at any given time.

People must be able to identify what is on the foreground in that given moment and what is in the background. People strive towards a well-balanced, well-integrated Gestalt. If this is accomplished the fore/ and background will be well differentiated (Aronstam, 1989:631). They need to have an opportunity to enhance their awareness regarding their fore/ and background needs. They can determine whether these needs are contributing to their stress levels and work on an effective stress management technique.

Practical Example:

If people are experiencing financial difficulties, they will concentrate on solving that problem (which is in their foreground) and their work will not be their main priority – it will move to the background. This may lead to a drop in productivity.

The following model, shown in Figure 2.1, was created by the researcher and shows that people need to balance different aspects in their lives. They need to become aware of themselves, as whole entities, in the here and now. There are choices every

person has to make and they need to take responsibility for their choices and the consequences thereof. People have to function within a working and/or social environment, which means that input has to be received from the environment and feedback, is given from the person. This leads to homeostasis.

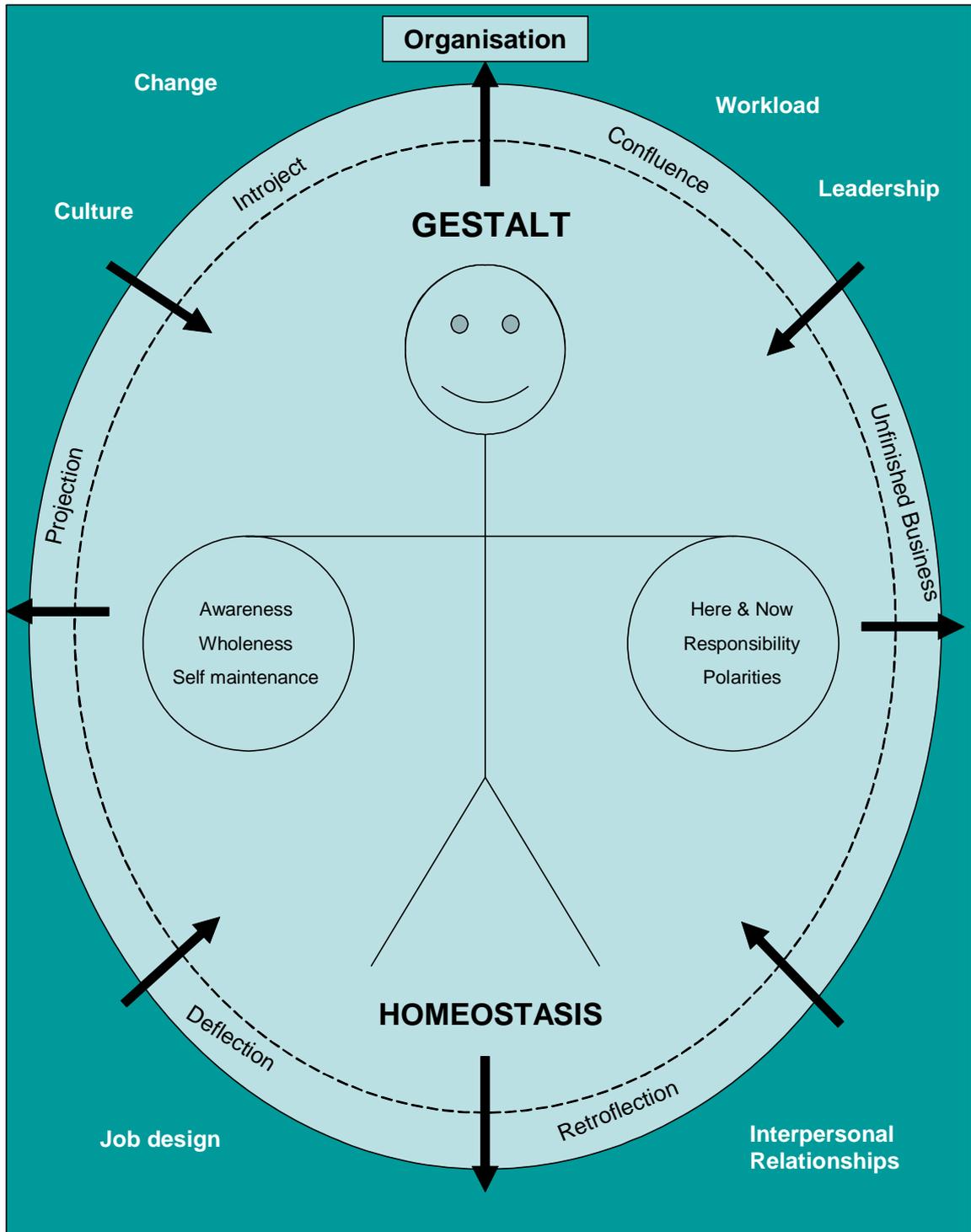


Figure 2.1 Homeostasis in the Gestalt

2.5 CONTACT BOUNDARY DYSFUNCTION AND FRAGMENTATION

2.5.1 Contact Boundaries

It is important to be aware of the individual's ability to make and sustain good contact. Contact is defined by Oaklander (1997:294) as:

...the ability to be fully present in a particular situation with all the aspects of the organism – senses, body, emotional expression, intellect - ready and available for use

Contact boundaries are not fixed and rigid. If the boundaries become rigid they inhibit growth. People cannot explore new behaviour and learn from new experiences if their contact boundaries are fixed and rigid and this is limiting to individuals (Aronstam, 1989:634).

Gestalt social workers aim to extend the range and scope of contact between people and environment, including contact between people's inner and outer selves and between client and social worker (Congress, 1995:1119).

Every organism is in contact with his/her environment at all times, but every individual has boundaries which differentiate the person from his/her environment. According to Dierks (1999:54), this state is called the "boundaried self" and states the following with regard to this boundaried state:

... can only happen in the here and now; therefore, we can normally assume that the boundaried self is also an adult self i.e. it is found within individuals who have reached the age of maturity.

These borders are essential to ensure that the individual does not lose his identity and at the same time, these borders must be open enough to allow exchanges to take place between the individual and the environment (Aronstam, 1989:634).

People must regulate the process of contact and withdrawal to ensure Gestalt formation. Boundaries are necessary to prevent confluence and thus a loss of independence (Aronstam, 1989:635). Thompson and Rudolph (1992:111) go further by stating that the loss of boundaries causes people to incorporate too much of themselves into others or they incorporate too much of the environment into themselves, which leads to the fact that they lose contact with themselves. On the other hand, people's boundaries may become so rigid that they start losing contact with resources in the environment. These people isolate themselves and this can restrict growth of their personalities (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:111). Harman and Franklin in Belkin (1985:241) state the following about growth:

... growth occurs when a person is willing to make contact with people, objects and situations in the environment.

When this contact does not occur there is a disruption in the contact boundary.

Dysfunction involves a lack of awareness which inhibits healthy functioning. If people's needs are not being satisfied, it leads to dysfunctional self regulation and emotional blocking (Greenberg, *et al.*, 1993:40). According to Perls in Aronstam (1989:637) fragmented behaviour is described as follows:

***...an inability to find and maintain the proper balances between
themselves and the rest of the world...***

Fragmented people are out of contact with themselves and with their needs. This leads to dependence on other people to find answers for their problems (Yonyef in Aronstam, 1989:637).

People often act in a certain way to survive. Dierks (1999:55) states the following about boundaries:

***...most of us have not been taught about boundaries, nor have we had
good models for adult behaviour..... The boundaried self is one who
knows the whole of him/herself in any given moment.***

People often inhibit, block, suppress and limit aspects of themselves (such as the senses, the body, the emotions, the intellect) to try and ensure their own emotional safety. These restrictions are called contact boundary disruptions and cause an interruption in the natural process of self regulation (Oaklander, 1994:144). Contact boundary dysfunctions are explained by taking a closer look at introjects, projections, confluence, retroflection, deflection and resistance.

2.5.2 Introjects

People who have introjects act as they believe other people expect them to act (O'Leary, 1992:39). Introjection is the process whereby people accept information, attitudes and ideas from the environment, without critically evaluating them

(Aronstam, 1989:638). Introjects can be internalised by people when they are children and often people live according to those introjects when they are adults.

According to Oaklander (1994:145), introjects are messages that individuals hear and incorporate. People believe what they hear about themselves without being able to discriminate whether the information they receive is good or bad. Many of these messages are not accurate and are even hurtful and can disturb a person's development and growth. Negative messages such as "you are stupid," or "you are lazy" destroy people's positive feelings of themselves and create a negative self esteem.

Therefore, it involves the incomplete assimilation of information that is given to people from the environment. As mentioned earlier, people hear the internalised message and they cannot move past that message. They need to be encouraged to let their own personal voice emerge by confronting an introject in the here and now (Congress, 1995:1119). A good example is when children were told that they would never be able to do mathematics. They believed the message and when the opportunity arose for the children, who have become adults, to do a simple calculation they would rather have someone else do it because the inner voice is saying "remember, you cannot do mathematics".

Within the corporate environment people may receive messages about themselves which are not fair and acceptable. Sometimes these messages re-enforce messages that these people received in the past and influence their self esteem negatively. It is important to create an opportunity where greater awareness can be facilitated and where the people are allowed to identify introjects that cause stress in their lives.

2.5.3 Projection

Projection is when people hold the environment responsible for everything that happens in their own lives (Aronstam, 1989:145). At times it is easier for people to blame circumstances or other people for the situation that they are in, rather than take responsibility for it. People project their feelings onto others because it is too difficult or frightening to accept their own feelings. These people would rather say “my boss is always in a bad mood” than “I do not like my boss” (Oaklander, 1994:145).

Congress (1995:1119) is of the opinion that people lose part of their personalities when they project:

... individuals who have experienced significant losses of important parts of their personalities by disavowing them and projecting them on others.

This experience dis-empowers the individual and gives the control to the environment. These people also need to be assisted to reclaim forgotten parts of their personalities. An example would be if a person believes that the boss is angry at him/her, while he/she is actually angry with the boss. He/she may have suppressed feelings of anger towards the boss and, therefore, needs to become aware of those feelings and be empowered to own them. It is important to give employees the opportunity to take ownership of their feelings. In this way they may feel more empowered to regain control of their lives.

2.5.4 Retroflection

Retroflection is a further disturbance of contact. Congress (1995:1118) states that retroflection can be explained as follows:

...retroflection occurs when individuals do to themselves what they would like to do to someone else, or when they do to themselves what they would like others to do to them.

People develop symptoms that they would like someone else to experience. At times they would like this hurtful behaviour to be directed towards themselves. For example, they will experience stomach problems, headaches and even self mutilation, that they would like someone else to experience (Oaklander, 1994:144). With retroflective behaviour, love becomes self-love and hate becomes self-hate (which could lead to suicide). These people become their own worst enemies (Aronstam, 1989:638).

People need to become aware of what they are thinking and experiencing before they can make decisions to change their lives. Sometimes people were not nurtured as children and they believe that they cannot make use of the support from others – then they have to be made aware of the fact that they do not live in that non-nurturing environment anymore and that they can reach out to others in their environment and accept nurturing from others (Congress, 1995:1120).

Awareness is very important in this instance. The people's health can be affected negatively if they do not realise that they are transferring a huge amount of negative energy into themselves. Stress related illnesses are often activated because of

physical reactions that people have to negative situations or people who cause stress in their lives.

2.5.5 Confluence

Confluence means that people become part of the environment to the extent that the environment controls their actions. Thompson and Rudolph (1992:111) describe confluence as follows:

People may incorporate too much of themselves into others or incorporate so much of the environment into themselves that they lose touch with where they are. Then the environment takes control.

According to Aronstam (1989:638) people cannot distinguish between their personal boundaries, thus where they begin and where they end and this prevents positive contact with others. Therefore, people who experience confluence are people who always focus on other people's needs instead of attending to their own. People often experience difficulty in identifying their own needs. They would rather maintain the *status quo* in their relationship than acknowledge unhappiness or boredom. Congress (1995:1120) states the following regarding confluence:

...confluence occurs when the client pretends that there are no differences between two individuals or systems and emphasises the similarities instead.

These individuals need to be made aware of the different needs that exist between two partners in a working relationship, friendship or marriage and be encouraged to

distinguish their own personal needs from what is happening in the confluent relationship (Congress, 1995:1120). In this situation, people can be too pleasing. They do not admit any of their own needs and just want the other people's needs to be met.

Within the corporate environment, confluent people are often those who go along with everything that has been said or suggested.

For example:

In a meeting employees will agree with one of the other representatives and then change their minds to agree with someone else, if it seems the more appropriate thing to do. This can be very stressful for these individuals because they are trying to please everybody and do not want anybody to be angry with them. It can also be to the detriment of the group or team as these people may have a valid contribution to make.

2.5.6 Deflection

Deflection means that people move away from environmental contact. Everything around them becomes vague and general (Clarkson, 1989:51). Furthermore, Clarkson (1989:52) states the following about deflection:

A person who habitually deflects does not use his/her energy in an effective way in order to get feedback from self, others or the environment.

Deflection refers to a situation where people literally break contact with other people. For example, they will break eye contact with other people who are talking to them or they may literally turn away from those people if they are experiencing discomfort in the situation (O'Leary, 1992:43).

This is often a survival mechanism that is used when the situation becomes too uncomfortable or frightening. People usually do not even realise that they are breaking contact and need to be made aware of their behaviour. They also need to determine what makes it important for them to break contact. The researcher is of the opinion that deflection can be utilised in the therapeutic situation. When the situation becomes too threatening, deflection occurs. The social worker can use the deflection as a pause and return to the threatening topic at a later stage.

2.5.7 Resistance

Resistance is a way of surviving in the world. Sometimes resistance is acceptable but often this behaviour is not deemed acceptable by society and people experience rejection because of it. Resistance can be used as an ally by people who feel vulnerable. It is the way in which people take care of themselves. Oaklander (1997:295) says the following about resistance:

...resistance surfaces over and over again, and each time it must be honoured...Resistance is also a sign that beyond this place of defence, there is highly significant material to be explored and worked through.

Resistance does not just occur on one level. There are different layers of resistance that need to be acknowledged. Perls refers to the layers of resistance as neurosis.

He says that people must pass through the five layers of neurosis to reach psychological maturity (Robinson, 1991:5). These layers are referred to as the phoney layer, the phobic layer, the impasse layer, the implosive layer and the explosive layer. According to Thompson and Rudolph (1992:112), the five layers form a process through which the person must move to grow towards a better life:

...the five layers form a series of counselling stages, or benchmarks, for the counselling process; in fact they could be considered as five steps to a better Gestalt way of life.

A stress management programme should allow people to experience and move through the layers of resistance. The five layers of resistance can be explained as follows:

- **The Phoney Layer**

The phoney layer is described by Robinson (1991:5) as follows:

It is when we react to others in stereotypical and inauthentic ways, playing games and losing ourselves in roles to avoid true intimacy.

According to Thompson and Rudolph (1992:112), ***many people find themselves trapped in trying to be what they are not.*** The phoney layer is thus when people try and fit into a certain role that they believe they should be in. They experience conflict and ambivalence within themselves but they often do not know how to free themselves from the role that they fulfil.

Practical example:

Corporate employees who attend stress management training keep telling the social worker that they have no need for the training. They often make jokes and do not want to focus on themselves. This can sometimes be distracting to the rest of the group and it gives the impression that these people do not want to stand still and focus on their own feelings and emotions.

- **The Phobic Layer**

In this case, people do not recognise the unacceptable traits of themselves because they want to avoid the emotional pain and fear attached to the process when they take ownership of these traits (Robinson, 1991:5). Awareness is necessary during this stage of the process. With regard to the phobic layer, Thompson and Rudolph (1992:112) state the following:

...as people become aware of their phony games, they become aware of their fears that maintain the games. This is often a frightening experience.

Therefore, during this layer of resistance, people experience fear which inhibits their behaviour. They do not want to let other people know how vulnerable they are in certain areas and often they have not even acknowledged to themselves how vulnerable they feel.

Practical Example:

Awareness is facilitated during a stress management course and the corporate employees become more and more aware of the games that they are playing to keep themselves from experiencing emotional pain. These people may become quiet or they may become argumentative because they do not feel as in control as they usually feel when they are playing games to survive the situation. The resistance can be experienced when these people decide to leave the training because they feel vulnerable and fear greater awareness.

- **Impasse**

Perls said the following about impasse:

The unpleasantness has to be got through, whether it's frustration, or the extreme other case, the situation where you have to face the experience of being dead - the real impasse, the real implosive layer (Belkin, 1995:307).

This is a point in the therapeutic process when people often feel stuck, which may lead to a sense of deadness or paralysis. They feel they cannot move forward without environmental support (Robinson, 1991:5). It takes courage for individuals to move through this layer to the next one. Thompson and Rudolph (1992:112) explain why people need courage to move through this layer as follows:

This is the layer people reach when they shed the environmental support of their games and find they do not know a better way to cope

with their fears and dislikes.

Practical Example:

The employees, who have always acted as if they are in complete control of their lives, suddenly start to realise that stress affects them physically and emotionally. They could always hide behind their games and they did not have to face the reality of the effect of the stress factors. Suddenly they experience stress related illnesses such as high blood pressure and they have to make adjustments to their lifestyle. Unfortunately they are afraid to make these adjustments and live accordingly. This can lead to a more passive reaction but people need to make decisions and take action, for them to be able to move through the impasse.

- **Implosive layer**

During the implosive layer the paralysis that was experienced in the previous layer is over and people can try out new ways to cope with their lives. According to Robinson (1991:5), the implosive layer is ***when we risk experiencing and going through the deadness.*** During this part of the process people become more and more aware of how they limited themselves in the past and at that point of time, they start to experiment with new behaviours (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:112).

Practical Example:

Corporate employees are afraid of trying out new activities as well as different ways of approaching certain life situations. They do not have the phoney games to shield them anymore. They realise that without the phoney games to shield them, they will experience everything and as a result, they feel vulnerable. As the training continues they realise that they find themselves in a safe environment and that other people in the group are trying out new ways to behave in certain situations. They take part in the activities and start taking more and more risks until their behaviour starts to change.

- **Explosive layer**

With regard to the explosive layer, Perls in Belkin (1980:242) states the following:

The explosion is the final neurotic layer that occurs when we get to the implosive state. As I see it, this progression is necessary to become authentic.

Thompson and Rudolph (1992:112) add the following to this definition:

If experiments with new behaviours are successful, people can reach the explosive layer, where they find much unused energy that had been tied up in maintaining a phony existence.

Furthermore, Robinson (1991:18) explains that the explosive layer is the release of energy that people have been holding back by pretending to be something they are not. When they release this energy, they feel alive and authentic.

Practical Example:

During this part of the process the following can happen:

If the corporate employees never made use of support systems in the organisation in the past as they felt that it would be a sign of weakness, or that other employees would think that they are not capable of coping with the pressure, they could start to change their behaviour by making use of the support systems that are available. As soon as these changes result in positive experiences, they may risk more and more. This will create more energy to use productively as well as for fun in and out of the workplace.

In the case of corporate employees, they need to be made aware of these layers of resistance so that they can understand their own process of changing by moving through one layer to another. The researcher is of the opinion that if resistance can be defined as acceptable in people's lives, they will be able to deal with it more successfully. Furthermore, they will be able to identify the meaning of the resistance and they will be able to deal with it as a challenge.

2.5.8 Responsibility

People need to take responsibility for their own lives and for the choices they make (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:113). Responsibility refers to people's ability to respond. Be aware of the fact that some people may not have the inner strength to take responsibility at that point in time, and that they may need to be empowered to

take action (Dierks, 1999:71).

Perls in Thompson and Rudolph (1992:113) refer to the aim of Gestalt therapy as follows:

... to help people help themselves to grow up – to mature, take charge of their lives, and become responsible for themselves.

This means that people must move away from environmental support and move towards self-support.

Glass in Corsini (1984:60) agrees with the abovementioned when he says:

Instead of denying, blaming, projecting and displacing responsibility for one's own experience, the individual is encouraged to accept thoughts, feelings and actions as part of the self. Attributing responsibility to scapegoats – parents, childhood traumas, spouse and the like – leaves the individual powerless and dependant.

When people place the blame for conflicts or unhappiness on others, they are busy projecting their own feeling and ideas on others. This means that they are not taking responsibility for their part in the disagreement or conflict and they do not respect the feelings or needs of other people (Dierks, 1999:64).

Therefore this is one of the most important principles of the Gestalt Theory. People often make choices and when things do not work out as they planned, they blame someone or something else for the outcome. In this way people dis-empower

themselves because they are always placing someone else in control of their lives.

2.5.9 Polarities

Polarities are natural aspects of human functioning. Greenberg, *et al.* (1995:40) suggested the following:

...strength and weakness, kindness and cruelty, selflessness and selfishness integrate into a balanced capacity to act adaptively.

Thus polarities are acceptable in society and all people experience them. However when the polarities start to confront one another, people's healthy adjustment can be affected (Greenberg, *et al.*, 1995:40).

The greater part of a day is taken up by solving conflict between polarities. Everything in life has positive and negative attributes and the individual is constantly trying to balance these polarities. Polarities are conflicting energies that people are confronted with on a daily basis (Sohakian in Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:112).

Dierks (1999:64) refers to the fight or flight reaction that people have because of stress, as polarities. People try and solve the stressful situation by fighting and attacking or by fleeing and withdrawing. These reactions both have advantages and disadvantages and people must try and find a balance between the two polarities.

The researcher agrees with the above mentioned authors that each situation has polarities. In a working situation there are some positive and negative aspects, such as long working hours (negative) but a good salary (positive). The corporate

employees should list the positive and negative aspects of different parts of their lives. In this way the corporate employees are making contact with themselves and they are establishing what the effect of this polarity is having on them. This gives the control back to the corporate employees and they feel empowered by the activity. Each individual has strengths and weaknesses and he/she has a choice whether to allow changes or to prefer that their circumstances stay the same.

Once people realise that there are always polarities, they also realise that they can regain control over their lives by making choices and taking responsibility for those choices. Robinson (1991:5) goes further by stating:

By experiencing fully the disowned parts or the opposing polarities within themselves clients reach a greater sense of self acceptance and renewed energy.

The following model, in Figure 2.2, was created by the researcher and it illustrates how contact boundaries can have an effect on the homeostasis of people.

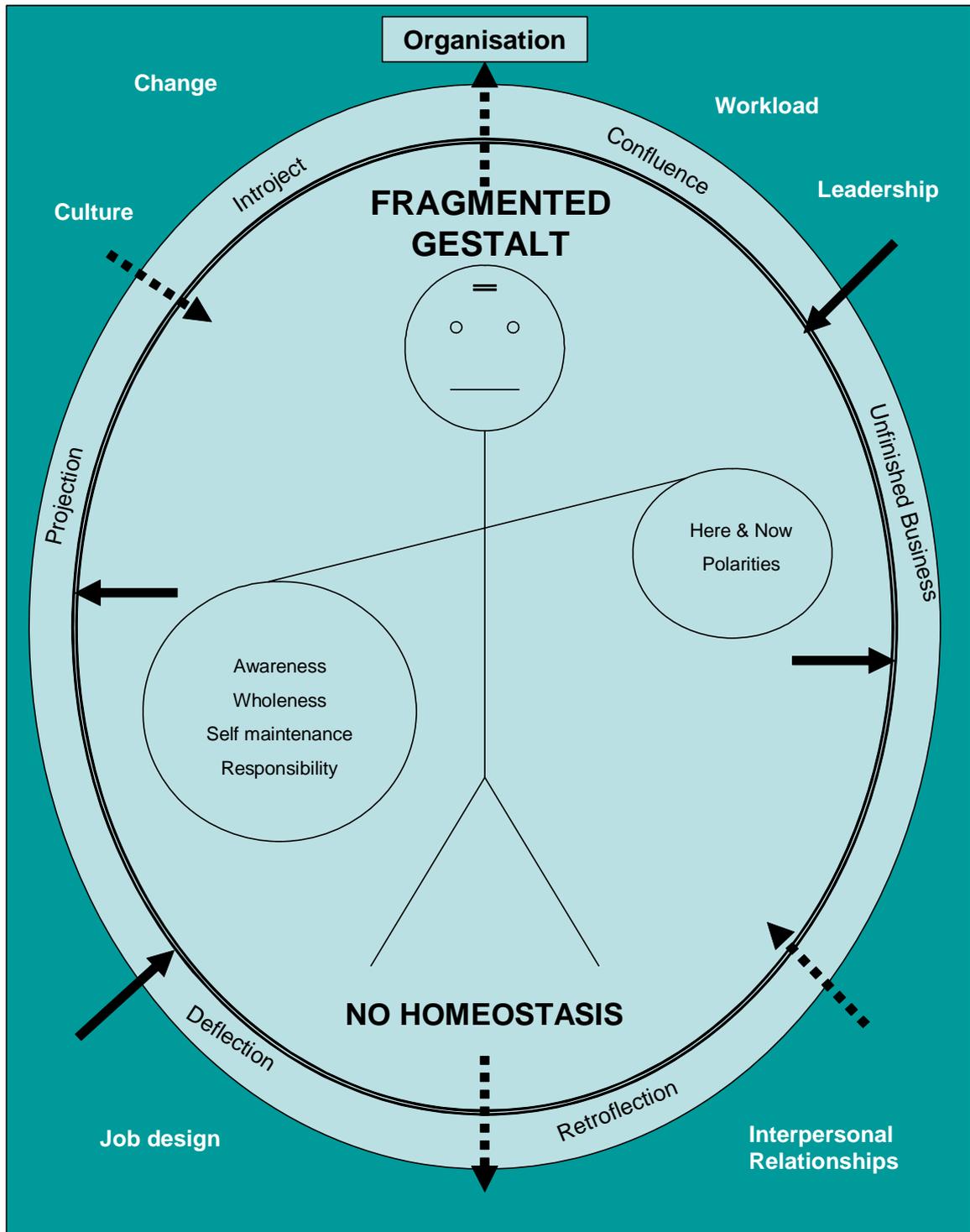


Figure 2.2 Fragmented Gestalt

The Gestalt may be fragmented because of different reasons. Contact boundaries can be too open and as a result people may find it difficult to differentiate where they end as a person and where the rest of the world begins. They cannot make their own decisions and always agree with the decisions that others make for them. If the contact boundaries are very rigid, people do not allow any input from other people. They believe what they are doing is always right and they do not consider others. These reactions can often take place because the individuals are not in contact with themselves and they are not aware of the fact that there are introjects in their lives which have an effect on their functioning, or that they project all their circumstances on others because they do not want to take responsibility for themselves. When this happens in the lives of people, they feel out of balance and they do not experience homeostasis in their lives.

2.6 TECHNIQUES

Gestalt therapy techniques can be used effectively in a stress management programme. Through the use of these techniques, corporate employees are enabled to regain homeostasis, make positive choices and take responsibility for those choices.

2.6.1 I/Thou relationship

Perls in Congress (1995:1119) refers to the I/Thou relationship as follows:

The I-Thou relationship is seen as a specific form of contact between two people in which the barrier between self and others is minimised and each person is not aware of their human connection. Much self-

awareness is necessary for this process to occur.

Therefore, the I/Thou relationship is a relationship in which the social worker respects and accepts the uniqueness of another person.

According to Oaklander (1997:293), the following principles can be used with regard to the I/Thou relationship:

- The social worker and the corporate employee meet each other as two separate and equal individuals.
- The social worker is as authentic as he/she knows how to be.
- The social worker does not use a patronising voice.
- The social worker does not manipulate or judge the corporate employee.
- The social worker does not place expectations on the corporate employee.
- The corporate employee will be respected as he/she is.
- The social worker will attempt to join the corporate employee's rhythm.
- The social worker will be fully present and in contact with the corporate employee.

When making use of the I/Thou relationship when working with the people who have contact dysfunctions, it is important to make use of "I" language. "It" language is changed to "I" language and the people are constantly asked with whom they are making contact. At the same time their awareness is increased by drawing attention to their body sensations. Furthermore, no gossiping is allowed and questions are changed into statements (Robinson, 1991:5). This guideline enables people to stay in the here and now and focus on the present situation in their lives.

Whilst the stress management programme is being presented, a relationship is built

with the corporate employees who take part in this programme. This relationship provides a safe environment for the corporate employees to work towards awareness and to experience homeostasis.

2.6.2 Sensory Contact

Sensory awareness is the “how” of contact. This is a crucial part of the stress management programme as sensory contact promotes awareness and helps people to gain homeostasis (Oaklander, 1988:128). Furthermore, Oaklander’s (1997:294) opinion regarding senses is that:

... these skills involve touching, looking and seeing, listening and hearing, tasting, smelling, speaking, sound, gesture and language and moving in the environment.

Sensory contact is a part of all people and it starts as soon as someone is born. Babies make contact with the world around them through their senses (touch, smell, taste, audio and visual). They experience their surroundings through their senses and enjoy touching objects that are unfamiliar to them. They also look around them and notice details in their surroundings that adults are often not aware of. Dierks (1999:58) states the following about people’s senses:

When we were very little, we did not understand words, so we saved information the only way we had available to us – sights, sounds, smells, taste and touch (our senses).

The researcher is of the opinion that as people become adults, they often lose

contact with their environment and with themselves. Sensory awareness promotes awareness and helps people to gain homeostasis (Oaklander, 1988:128). Perls in Robinson (1993:6) states that a person has to ***lose your mind and come to your senses***. Senses are central modes to contact with the self, others and the environment. The five essential senses will be discussed as follows:

- **Sight**

Sight has an important function in the lives of people, as it is the main co-ordinating sense. This sense helps people to create an understanding of the world around them. People can relate the visual input with the actual experience (Schoeman, 1996:43; Oaklander, 1988:11).

According to Ludick (1995:79), sight in itself is not a guarantee for good contact with the environment. The quality of the sensory perception determines the quality of the contact.

Therefore sight stimulates a reaction in people. They make an association when they see something that is significant to them at some stage.

For Example:

People often associate a colour with an incident that took place in their lives. If the person wore burgundy to his/her matriculation farewell dance, this colour may trigger memories when he/she is suddenly confronted with the colour. If this was a happy occasion, the feelings that are experienced are positive and if this was a negative occasion, the feelings that the person experiences many years later could be negative.

The use of colour can be very effective in making contact with unfinished business in the person's life.

- **Hearing**

Children can hear while they are still in their mother's wombs. As children grow they learn to hear what they want to hear. People often close their hearing sense to that which is hurtful or unpleasant. As people repress their sense of hearing, they deprive themselves of intensive sensory observation (Schoeman, 1996:43 & 44).

People can hear but they do not necessarily listen. O'Leary (1992:33) states the following about the hearing sense:

The listener must think with the individual. Thinking manifests itself in asking more information, but not directing the conversation, nodding, being actively silent, assisting individuals in examining their own feelings and finding their own answers.

Corporate employees need to be made aware of the fact that they shut themselves off to some information and thus inhibit their level of experience.

Practical Example:

The corporate employee may have had a negative experience with a teacher when he/she was at school. The teacher tended to speak in a specific tone of voice when communicating with the corporate employee (when he/she was a child). Within the working environment, there may be a colleague or a manager who speaks to the corporate employee with the same tone of voice as the teacher did. This could create such strong reactions in the corporate employee that he/she just blocks the other person out – he/she is listening but does not **hear** what the other person is saying.

- **Smell**

Smell is a sensory experience which is enjoyed by most people. According to Schoeman (1996:45), this sense can be described as follows:

The sense of smell is used to gather information about the surroundings, what is happening and to discriminate between pleasant and unpleasant smells.

The role of smell is often underestimated. Some smells have strong associations with memories from the past.

For Example:

The corporate employee may have had a grandmother whom he/she was very fond of. When he/she goes for an interview for a job, the interviewer may be wearing the same perfume as the perfume that the interviewee's grandmother usually wore. This could put the interviewee at ease and she/he may feel less apprehensive than if the association was not pleasant. The sensory association is with a "safe" person.

- **Taste**

The organ associated with taste is the tongue but the sense of smell usually has an influence on how something tastes to people. All people have a unique sense of taste. What is pleasant and enjoyable to one person may not be pleasant to the next person (Schoeman, 1996:47).

Therefore, sense of taste also brings many memories along with it. As soon as people taste something they have not tasted for a long time, they are moved back in time to the people or the place where they last experienced that particular taste. Awareness is facilitated when people are enabled to make sensory contact.

For example:

Corporate employees may attend a work function where food is served that reminds them of a specific occasion where they had similar food with people they have not seen for a long time. This could immediately stimulate a longing for those people or that situation that forms a part of the memory.

- **Touch**

The skin is the largest organ in the body. The world is explored to a great extent by the sense of touch. People often make contact with others around them and with their environment through their sense of touch (Schoeman, 1996:47).

Once again, touch is an individualised sensory experience. People experience different textures in different ways. Some people enjoy the feeling of wool against their skin while others prefer silk. Some people are very aware of the fact that some materials tend to scratch while others do not even notice this effect. According to the researcher's experience with the training of adults, she has often found different sensory reactions to the play therapy mediums. Some people enjoy the feeling of the clay and the sand on their hands while others want to wash their hands as soon as the activity has been completed. Some people are not always aware of the effect that the tactile experience has on them. As soon as they are made aware of their own reactions, they can link them with some incident in their lives and in the process they can make contact with themselves.

Therefore, different people have different personal boundaries. This boundary

needs to be respected. Some people do not mind making contact with others through touch, but others prefer their own space.

2.6.3 Breathing and Body Posture

- **Breathing**

Breathing is an indication of how comfortable people are or how anxious they may feel. People's breathing, blood circulation and muscle tension have to do with their emotional state (Passons, 1975:120). Comfort and peacefulness are related to slower breathing and heart rate. If people are made aware of their breathing they can identify the situations or feelings that cause the increase in the breathing tempo.

Oaklander (1988:128) states that breathing gives the social worker much information about people. She states the following about breathing:

...breathing deeply, can dispel the anxiety and allow the pleasurable feelings to surge through our bodies and give us the feeling of power and support...

When people are anxious and fearful, their breathing is restricted and they can become even further disconnected from themselves. It is necessary for people to do breathing exercises to regain a feeling of power and not to feel as if they are victims (Oaklander, 1997:297).

During stress management training, people can have the opportunity to do

breathing exercises and they can be informed how this relates to relaxation and stress management. Awareness is enhanced through these activities and people can experience a greater sense of themselves whilst doing these activities.

- **Body Posture**

Body posture is a form of non-verbal communication and every emotion has a body connection. This non-verbal communication starts at an early age. According to Oaklander (1997:297), body posture is often a reaction that develops in people when they are still young. She describes it as follows:

Children develop body patterns at an early age, often creating at that time the defects in posture that we usually see more clearly in adolescents and adulthood.

For example, if the employee's shoulders are hanging he/she may try to convey a message that he/she feels sad, tired or burdened. It is important to confirm with the person that the message that is being conveyed is correctly understood by asking (for example) "Are you tired or frustrated?"

According to Dierks (1999:57), people experience their emotions physically and the social worker must be sensitive to these reactions:

When something or someone in the environment does or says something that is perceived as an attack, it is often experienced physically. Most of us feel our stomach turn, our fists/jaw clench or our heart beat faster. Some people experience an anxious feeling in the chest

area. When this happens it is an indicator that there is a hole in the boundary.

The social worker must be sensitive to the fact that corporate employees can experience emotions that are communicated non-verbally and that people are often not aware of the fact that they are experiencing physical discomfort as a result to their emotions.

2.6.4 Dream-work

Perls in Oaklander (1988:145 -146) states the following about dreams:

...a message from yourself to yourself, to whatever part of you is listening. The dream is possibly the most spontaneous expression of the human being, a piece of art that we chisel out of our lives.

Kovel in Robinson (1991:6) agrees when he states the following:

All elements of the manifest dream stand for parts of the dreamer's self.

When people are sharing their dreams with others, they are offering a part of themselves. With this technique, people share a recent dream with the social worker.

The Gestalt school believes that the events in a dream represent fragmented and denied parts of the personality (Beck, in Magill, 1996:744).

The people are encouraged to share the dream in the present as if they are part of the dream.

During dream-work the focus is on:

- What the person is feeling in the dream?
- What the person is doing in the dream?
- What would the person like to do in the dream?
- What is the person's relationship with the other objects or people in the dream?
- What does the person think the dream is trying to tell him/her?
- How does the dream end?
- How he/she would like the dream to end?

(Compare Oaklander 1988:146 -147 and O'Leary, 1992:77)

Dream-work can be used effectively with the other play therapy mediums. People can be asked to draw their dreams, to play them out in the sand or to create the dreams in the clay. All these activities enhance awareness and allow people to gain control by deciding how the dream ends and what takes place in the dream.

2.6.5 Self Nurturing

Self nurturing refers to the fact that people's self perception is of such a nature that they allow themselves some self nurturing. This can also be linked to homeostasis in people's lives. People need to learn when to say yes and when to say no to other people, as a way to ensure that they do not reach the stage of burn-out. There is a time to work and a time to rest. People need to learn to accept themselves with their positive and negative characteristics and should even be prepared to spoil themselves from time to time (Schoeman, 1996:181). Self nurturing takes place when people are able to integrate the polarities in their lives and live as whole

human beings.

Corporate employees often find it difficult to do self nurturing because they are so focused on their work. Self nurturing means that they have to be good to themselves, they have to take leave when their leave is due and they have to turn their cellular phones off to ensure a break from work. They have to make time to exercise and do some fun activities that give meaning to their lives. An excellent way of doing some self nurturing is by creating a safe place where people have the sole right to enjoy that space. The safe place can be imaginary or real. According to Ludick (1995:89), people can be guided to a “safe place” where they may feel nurtured or where they can nurture themselves. The researcher combines this activity with visualisation, so that people can make use of their “safe place” anywhere and anytime.

2.7 CONCLUSION

The Gestalt Theory is more than just a theoretical frame of reference. It is a way of life and it can be assimilated into the corporate employee’s life. As soon as the corporate employee becomes aware of the factors that are influencing his/her Gestalt negatively, he/she can start taking action and move towards self regulation and self nurturing.

The main purpose of the Gestalt Theory is to create an environment in which people can reach maturity and take control of their lives. People must reach a greater state of awareness which enables them to experience fully in the “here and now” (Perls in Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:113). Gestalt therapy can thus be measured with regard to the people’s awareness, the extent to which people take responsibility for their own actions and move away from environmental support towards self-support (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:113).

The Gestalt Theory was developed by Perls and is based on the following concepts:

- A person's awareness should be facilitated in the here and now.
- A person is a whole and no part of the person acts without all the other parts involved.
- Contact is necessary with him/herself and with the environment. Contact boundary disruptions limit the person's experience of his/her world.
- Dysfunctions and fragmentation need to come to the fore so that the person can address them and live to his/her full potential.
- A person is able to have a balanced Gestalt.

The Gestalt Theory focuses on each person's individual process. People are allowed the opportunity to regain their personal control. It is important that corporate employees realise that they are the only ones who can take control of their lives and, therefore, they can manage their own stress levels more effectively. They have to realise that they have to make choices and take responsibility for those choices.

The following chapter focuses on stress and how stressors can affect the lives of the corporate employees.