Gestalt & Hypnosis
By: Razi Ghaemmagham Farahani

I always wondered about the differences between Gestalt approach and the Hypnosis in relation with client’s inner or outer conflict. This story began when I was a student of the Gestalt institution, in the class through the group exercises and experiments I realized some of classmate during the experiment they are in the state of trance yet, when I brought this matter up most of them just said that is not the case. I attended several workshops and conferences and I developed this thought to a sort of belief that Gestalt and hypnosis’ way of dealing with conflicts are so close and I could say in some way they are similar to each other.

I discussed my belief with my dear friend and mentor Dr. Mark Rosenbloom and his answer was kind of strange and interesting. He said, “While I am speaking with you notice your hands and be aware of the feeling and sensation in your hand”. I immediately became aware of my hands and I felt my left hand getting slightly lighter than the other. That day I felt I had a desire to learn this wonderful tool that I can help myself and others. I believe there are not many differences between Hypnosis and Gestalt way of approach to the inner and outer conflict of the individual.

Therefore, I would like you to allow yourself to observe, see, feel and sense the positive and negative side of my belief and allow yourself to accept or reject this belief of mine. I am sure we will have one common view related to this subject which is we all want to understand ourselves and client in some way. No matter what that method is or called, as long is helpful to the client we will be satisfied with our work and the client’s challenge.

According Oxford dictionary, definition of word Gestalt is; Perceived organized whole that is more than sum of its parts. Gestalt therapy deals with the whole person and especially with the feelings and emotional aspect of human, which emphasis on the relationship in terms of Figure and Background.

The background is the context or environment and the figure is the entity or object, need or element. Gestalt methodology was formed in Germany in the end of nineteenth century. I am not going to talk about history of the Gestalt methodology and its founder and I am assuming that most of you know more about this subject. There are certain therapeutic assumptions that a Gestaltist has, that interaction with contact environment is necessary for the growth. NO change is possible in isolation from the environment yet, any change will occur within place and time which is here and now.

The Gestaltist is held accountable so that an individual is able to be aware of these elements and consider that individuals have more control over their total being that they might realise. Another assumption that a Gestaltist has, that interaction with contact environment is necessary for the growth. NO change is possible in isolation from the environment yet, any change will occur within place and time which is here and now.

Gestaltist is promoting his perception and understanding of need, desire, wanting in general life, in terms of here and now. The events of the past are gone and what the future has in store is irrelevant and not necessary for coping with the present. With such perception we could prevent fear of unknown elements which occurs within future and because of a past trauma. Of course I
want to admit that this process might be painful for some people and will cause them behave with schema avoidance and schema compensation. The concept of our work is the whole organism that we consider aims towards a balanced state. Methodology of Gestalt gives special attention to awareness, Maturation (self support), Integration (individual as whole) and responsibility (taking ownership of own action).

Also the use of language is a very important element. There are four major disturbance and interference in good functioning occur which are, Introjection, projection, Retroflection and Confluence. (Perls 1973). Gestalt and hypnosis have similar approaches regarding to client’s conflict and combining the Gestalt approach and hypnosis technique is a wonderful way of guiding the client towards his/her own desired closure.

Working in ‘here and now’ is a very useful concept which is mostly adopted within trance work, such as, imaginary work, visualisation or age regression (living past). It is a very immediate way of helping the client focus on what is important now and getting away from intellectualisation and involving dealing with feelings and emotions.

Use of age regression in hypnosis, having allowed an incident or event to be made consciously aware and by using a gestalt approach it is possible to place the event in the present which is the way of enabling the client to complete any ‘unfinished business’. It is very important that a counsellor or therapist to not impose own belief and assumption to the client directly or indirectly. If this happens with the use of improper language or lack of experience therefore there is a great danger to guide the client toward the important issue like false memory. It is also very important and essential to respect the client’s desire and choice.

For example if a client does not want to go back and review what happened in the past, the counsellor or therapist has no choice rather than respect and implement approach that needs consider present rather than past. Using hypnosis to focus on the ‘here and now’ makes it possible to continue bringing the client back into the present to work on the feelings related to what comes up. Feelings, emotions are important parts of Gestalt therapy. Within hypnosis the client is able to stay with own feeling. When in the hypnotic state it is easier to follow what is being suggested, than to ‘opt out’ and avoid what might be uncomfortable and painful. On the other hand the therapist who uses hypnosis has an advantage over the therapist who is not using hypnosis. Hypnosis is a tool which has ability to help us ‘disassociate’ to some extent, initially allowing us to experience a feeling without being overwhelmed and having to run away from it. This can facilitate the progress of contacting and releasing feelings and pain.

Dr. Mark Rosenbloom used differentiates the state of trance with hypnosis and he believes that: “Trance is a daydream with the subject not responding to outside influence. Hypnosis is a specific trance state in which the subject does respond to outside direction”. I am finding his belief appropriate base on the average time that each person spends on involuntarily daydreaming which reduces anxiety and stress.

Awareness is one of the key functions of gestalt therapy. Drawing attention to awareness is involve in one of many methods used by Gestalt therapists. Awareness is highlighting the matter of choice that the individual has; it is not should or must. When the client is not aware the
client’s choices and responses are limited and it might become guided choice (projections behaviour of the therapist) which brings up the involuntary and undesired response of the client’s (Introjections behaviour) as a result of imposed belief or assumption of therapist on the client.

Using hypnosis is an effective way of training the client in awareness. Based on nature of the hypnotic state, the senses such as, sound and touch are not so acute, and also are subject to manipulation in deep hypnotic subjects. It is not difficult to help client refocus on very small and detailed sensations.

The reason for this is that the outside distractions are perceived as minor in trance state and any small changes in feelings and sensations will be noticed when encouraged by the appropriate hypnotic suggestion. It is easy within hypnosis to assist the client to become more aware of slight changes in the body posture or muscle tension or thought process, of course this can be done within gestalt approach too.

There is always resistance on the conscious level of the client within gestalt approach. In conclusion there is a variety of Gestalt techniques which could be use with hypnosis like empty chair, reversals and language. All awareness techniques become more powerful with use of hypnosis and guided imagery experiment of Gestalt. Indeed there might be a closure for some of human’s conflicts yet there is no closure for ideas and growth of human beings and this is beauty of life.