

Beyond Mental Health

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Emotional well-being doesn't mean feeling happy all the time. Here Susan Gregory explains the basic principles of one therapeutic modality, Gestalt therapy.

Well-Being

Singers' needs for productive thinking, clear-flowing emotions, and relational skills may not be adequately served when we think only in terms of "mental health." In real life, people suffer, become confused, and often lack knowledge about how to get along. These are the very dilemmas that singers portray in our great operas! Writing from my past experience as an opera singer and my present experience as a therapist, I would like to describe ways to understand human functioning that look beyond concepts of "health" and "illness." Singers need their abilities to imagine vividly and to be expressive on large scale. For career success, they must nurture these artistic qualities, thus expanding the concept of what healthy functioning is for singers.

When I began my training to become a therapist, I looked for a different approach in helping performing artists. I looked for a modality that valued the choice of an artist's life; that was interested in awareness and truth in the moment; that acknowledged that states of health and illness are context-related; that paid attention to breathing and movement as part of the therapy, and that used aesthetic understandings to evaluate better or poorer functioning in life. I found that Gestalt therapy fulfilled those criteria.

"Contacting" is a concept I think about in Gestalt therapy. It reminds me of what performing artists want to have with their audience and does not carry a value judgment. Contacting includes being able to sense what it is you are in need of (being in contact with yourself), being able to perceive the environment and see if what you need can be found there. Contacting also includes mobilizing yourself to move toward and reach out for what you want; it also means pausing to assimilate what you have experienced. Sometimes this is called the contact cycle.

Contacting implies a continual interaction with people and things in your environment. You and the environment together are called the "field." Healthy awareness of self always includes awareness of the field. In Gestalt therapy, we believe that problems of living arise when we are unclear in perceiving ourselves or the field, or when we prevent ourselves from mobilizing and reaching out, or when we don't take time to assimilate. These difficulties we call "interruptions in contacting."

The work of client and therapist is to bring to awareness the interruptions and to experiment with ways of resolving them. We do not, then, categorize a person as having "health" or "illness." We ask, rather, whether a person's actions are contactful or interruptive of contact. Client and therapist, as a team, attend to those aspects of living that interest and excite the client. We don't assume there is something to fix, unless it is

of concern to the client. And if the client's concerns include aspects in which a psychiatrist would be appropriately consulted, we include the medical piece at that time.

In Gestalt therapy, the implied questions are "Is your life working for you? If not, how might you be interrupting yourself?" And, together, "What can we figure out to do about it?" We never ask, "Is your life working the way the therapist thinks it should?" That would imply that the therapist owns the criteria of "health" and "illness." But we believe that the client is the true expert on her/his life. The therapist's expertise lies in knowing how to support and amplify the client's own self-discovering and decision-making. Life occurs on a continuum. "Health" and "illness" are polarities that don't describe the richness and complexity of all that lies between. It is this very richness that singers portray on stage. To do so, they need to be able to live it with resiliency, self-understanding, and self-appreciation.

How Am I Doing?

That's a question people often ask, but emotional balance doesn't necessarily mean feeling happy all the time. It means having responses appropriate to the experiences at hand. How can we know what "appropriate" means?

Here are some guidelines.

- Name the emotion you're feeling.
- Feel it while still being able to think
- Think clearly about what actions you want to take
- Mobilize self-support to carry out your actions.
- Find and utilize support from your environment.
- Mourn when painful things occur.
- Finish mourning.
- Celebrate when satisfying things occur.
- Tolerate ambiguity and complexity