

## **Gestalt Therapy – The Empty Chair Technique**

### **Presented by Derek Rutter**

#### **Explanation:**

The empty chair technique, often called the two-chair technique, is a type of role playing activity in which the clinician asks the client to pretend that another person or some aspect of the client's self are sitting in the empty chair. The clinician then instructs the client to engage the empty chair. Emphasis is placed on what the client is noticing within themselves while doing this. The client is then asked to switch seats and reverse roles, thus continuing the dialogue from the opposing perspective. Again, the client continues to observe what and how they are feeling.

#### **When and Why:**

This technique aims to help clients move away from talking about doing something to actually experiencing it first-hand in the present. It helps clients who are out of touch with the experience of their emotions move beyond cognitive, verbal, and abstract realms into the experiential. Specifically, this technique is best employed when the client's presenting problem is associated with some form of internal conflict or split.

#### **The Split:**

- 1.) **Identification of a split** – In such situations, clients verbalize a split between how they would like to act, speak, or be and how they feel they are able or allowed to act, speak or be. The result is an internal sense of conflict that gives rise to a fragmentation of selves or parts of the self, which is the opposite of the whole-self that Gestalt therapy seeks to empower. The empty chair technique attempts to facilitate identification of these fragmented selves by having the client engage with them experientially in the present.
- 2.) **Language of a split** - The split can be identified through the client's language, which typically includes "but" statements. "I want to take control of my life, but I can't say 'no.'" In this example, "want[ing] to take control of my life" represents one "self," while "I can't say 'no'" represents a different, opposing "self." It is crucial for the clinician to be perceptive of such language. Ultimately, the goal is that clients will discover a path to resolution by taking responsibility for both selves.
- 3.) **Types of splits** – There are potentially many types of splits that clients may experience. Greenberg (1979) identifies three primary types of split. The Conflict Split is when two aspects of the client's self are in opposition ("I want to take control of my life, but I can't say 'no.'"). The Subject/Object Split is when clients are doing something to themselves ("I am too hard on myself.") The Attribution Split is when clients attribute some aspect of themselves to the world ("She made me feel stupid.")
- 4.) **The Experiencing Chair vs. The Other Chair** – The chair first inhabited by the client is called "The Experiencing Chair," while the chair inhabited by the opposing person or part of the self is called "The Other Chair"

#### **Role of Clinician:**

In the empty chair technique, the clinician functions as observer. It is important to pay close attention to the power structure of the dynamic taking place between the client's multiple roles and call attention to it. Often the client is more experientially engaged in The Experiential Chair and more mechanistic or superficial in The Other Chair. However, ideally the client will

become more experientially attuned in The Other Chair as the technique progresses, facilitating deeper recognition of both sides, and ultimately leading to a more “desirable” position being taken while in The Other Chair. For this reason, the clinician should pay special attention to any changes taking place in The Other Chair.

Greenberg (1979) recommends five principals for informing the clinician’s role in the empty chair technique. First, is maintaining the contact boundary, which means making sure that the two parts are distinctly separate and making contact. Second, is responsibility, which means encouraging clients to avoid avoidance and take responsibility through the use of “I” statements. Third, is attending, which means observing the client and making them aware of what they are doing or saying and encouraging the client to “stay with” what they are feeling. Fourth, is heightening, which is to encourage the client to highlight key gestures or language through exaggeration. Fifth, is expressing, which is encouraging the client to express both the content and process of their emotions, with emphasis on being specific.

### **References:**

Appalachian Gestalt Therapy Institute. (2013). Retrieved June 12, 2013, from <http://agti.org/>

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