

From “What If?” to “What Is”

A Gestalt-informed processing workshop for anxiety and anxious thoughts

Core shift

Anxious thoughts often ask: “What if?” Gestalt processing adds: “What is happening in me right now as I imagine that?”

Awareness	Present experience	Body cues
Figure/ground	Polarities	Experiments

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Educational resource. Not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, crisis support, clinical training, supervision, or individualized care.

How to use this resource

This resource is designed as both a short teaching guide and a printable participant worksheet. It can be used for personal reflection, psychoeducation, or a bounded workshop with appropriate facilitation and consent.

- For participants: choose one current, manageable worry rather than your most traumatic or overwhelming material.
- For facilitators: keep exercises optional, collaborative, and grounded. Do not push catharsis or disclosure.
- For translation: text is kept in short blocks so it can be adapted into French or Spanish without redesigning the whole resource.

Gestalt is not CBT in different clothes

This resource does not primarily ask whether an anxious thought is rational. It asks what happens in the whole person as the thought is lived in the present: body, image, emotion, impulse, relationship, need, and environment.

Safety and scope

- Pass is always an acceptable answer.
- Keep eyes open, move, pause, or stop at any time.
- Do not use chairwork to force trauma disclosure or emotional flooding.
- If severe panic, dissociation, psychosis, acute suicidality, or major destabilization is present, use individualized qualified support instead of a general workshop.

Workshop length

Format	Suggested structure
75 minutes	Use core exercises: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12
90 minutes	Add language experiment, polarity, support mapping
120 minutes	Add optional two-chair dialogue and fuller group debrief

What is Gestalt processing?

Gestalt therapy approaches experience as an organized whole. A thought, feeling, posture, memory, impulse, relationship, and environment are not treated as isolated fragments. They are explored as parts of a living situation. The central clinical task is not simply explanation but awareness: noticing what is happening now and how the person is participating in that experience. (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951/1994; Yontef, 1993)

A sentence such as “Everyone will think I am incompetent” is therefore not explored only as a cognitive claim. Gestalt processing also attends to breath, tension, images, impulses, avoidance, history, expectation, need, support, and the actual context in which the fear appears.

The basic question

What is happening in me, between me and the world, as I say this anxious thought right now?

A brief history

Gestalt therapy developed in the 1940s and early 1950s through the work of Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, Ralph Hefferline, and the early Gestalt community. Its sources included psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, phenomenology, existential philosophy, field theory, organismic thinking, body-oriented psychotherapy, and dialogical approaches. (Woldt & Toman, 2005)

The 1951 book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman became the foundational text. Contemporary Gestalt therapy is generally more relational, collaborative, contextual, and trauma-aware than the confrontational style sometimes associated with Fritz Perls’ public demonstrations.

Gestalt therapy is not the same as Gestalt psychology

Gestalt psychology studied perception and the organization of experience into meaningful wholes. Gestalt therapy was influenced by some of those ideas, but it is not simply a clinical application of perception research. It grew from a broader psychotherapy, philosophical, embodied, and relational tradition. (Woldt & Toman, 2005)

Core Gestalt concepts for anxiety work

Concept	In plain language
Awareness	Noticing sensations, emotions, images, impulses, thoughts, contact, and avoidance as they happen.
Here and now	Exploring past and future through how they are being lived in the present.
Figure / ground	The worry becomes figure; context, support, strengths, and alternatives may fall into the background.
Contact	How the person meets, avoids, reaches toward, or withdraws from people, needs, tasks, and environments.
Creative adjustment	A pattern may have been useful somewhere, even if it is costly now.
Polarities	Opposing positions can both belong to the person: speak/hide, risk/protect, connect/withdraw.
Experiment	A small action or awareness practice that creates new experience rather than merely new explanation.

The paradoxical theory of change

Arnold Beisser (1970) described a central Gestalt idea: change often becomes possible when a person more fully becomes what they are, rather than trying to force themselves into what they think they should be. For anxiety, this means the work may begin with “anxiety is here” rather than “I must become calm immediately.”

Practical meaning

The aim is not to love the anxiety. The aim is to stop fighting the fact that it is present long enough to understand what it is doing, what it needs, and what choices are available now.

How Gestalt understands anxiety

Anxiety as future-oriented experience

Anxiety often involves physically being in the present while psychologically living in an imagined future. Gestalt writers have sometimes described this as futurizing: the body responds as if a predicted scene is already occurring. (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951/1994)

Present fact	"I sent a message two hours ago."
Future construction	"They are angry."
Further construction	"I ruined the relationship."
Body response	Tight stomach, shallow breath, urge to check or apologize.

Anxiety as interrupted movement

A classic Gestalt formulation links anxiety with excitement, anticipation, inhibition, breathing, and interrupted action. This should be used carefully: it is an experiential clinical formulation, not a complete biological explanation of anxiety. The useful question is: what movement, need, or impulse might be trying to happen beneath the anxiety? (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951/1994)

- Do I want to speak?
- Move closer or farther away?
- Set a boundary?
- Prepare, ask, protest, rest, cry, or take a risk?

What "reframing" means here

A Gestalt reframe does not usually mean replacing a negative thought with a positive thought. It means making the experience more complete: present fact, imagined future, body, feeling, need, support, and next experiment all become visible.

Instead of: "This is definitely going to go badly."

Try: "Right now, I notice myself imagining that this will go badly. My body reacts as if that future is already happening. I do not know yet what will happen. I need support and I can take one small step to find out."

The workshop map

Time	Focus
0-10 min	Arrive, orient, name safety agreements
10-20 min	Choose one anxious thought
20-35 min	Move from story to whole experience
35-50 min	Separate what is from what if
50-65 min	Explore figure/ground, protection, impulse, and polarity
65-80 min	Design one small experiment
80-90 min	Integration and closing

Facilitator stance

Use curiosity, consent, and choice. Do not interpret participants for themselves. Let “I don’t know” remain a valid answer.

Exercise 1 — Arriving in the present

Purpose: orient before exploring anxiety. The goal is not to relax. The goal is to know where you are.

Three things I can see right now:

Two sounds I can hear:

One physical sensation I notice:

Right now, my anxiety is 0–10:

Exercise 2 — Choose one anxious thought

Choose one current worry that feels meaningful but manageable.

My anxious thought, exactly as my mind says it:

When I believe this thought, the future I imagine is:

Exercise 3 — From story to experience

Instead of explaining why the anxiety exists, notice how it is happening.

Body: As I say the anxious thought, I notice:

Emotion: The feelings I notice are:

Image: The scene or image my mind creates is:

Impulse: My body wants to:

Behavior: When I become anxious about this, I usually:

Relationship: The person or people whose reaction matters most are:

Exercise 4 — What is vs. what if

This exercise distinguishes observable present information from prediction, imagination, and rehearsal.

What is happening now? Only include what is currently observable or known:

What am I imagining, predicting, or rehearsing?

Right now, the fact is:

Right now, I am imagining:

Exercise 5 — Figure and ground

What has become FIGURE? What feels enormous, urgent, or impossible to ignore?

What has disappeared into the GROUND? Context, support, strengths, fatigue, alternatives, uncertainty, actual needs:

Something true that anxiety is currently leaving outside the frame:

Exercise 6 — The language experiment

Language can make an experience feel fixed. Try each shift and notice what changes. The objective is precision, not forced positivity.

Automatic sentence	Awareness sentence
Instead of “I am anxious.”	Try “I notice anxiety right now.”
Instead of “This is going to happen.”	Try “I notice myself imagining this will happen.”
Instead of “I have to.”	Try “I choose to,” “I do not want to,” or “I am afraid of what could happen if I don’t.”
Instead of “I can’t.”	Try “I do not know how yet,” “I am afraid to,” or “I need support to.”

The sentence that feels most accurate now is:

Exercise 7 — What is the anxiety trying to do?

Approach the anxiety as meaningful information rather than as an enemy.

My anxiety seems to be trying to protect me from:

It wants me to prevent:

It wants certainty about:

If anxiety could speak, it might say: “I need you to...”

Is that need relevant to my situation?

Is the strategy anxiety is using actually helping?

Exercise 8 — Notice the interrupted impulse

Return attention to the body. Do not force deep breathing. Notice what changes when you imagine the feared situation.

Breath:

Posture:

Hands:

Face/jaw:

Movement:

What does my body seem to want to do?

What stops me?

Exercise 9 — Find the polarity

Anxiety frequently contains competing positions. Let both exist before choosing what to do.

One part of me wants:

Another part of me wants:

What does the first position protect?

What does the second position protect?

What does each position need from the other?

Optional exercise — Two-chair dialogue

Use only if appropriate, consensual, and grounded. Participants may imagine the chairs on paper instead of physically moving.

Position	Prompts
Chair A: The anxious position	“I am afraid that...” “I need...” “I am trying to stop you from...” “What I wish you understood is...”
Chair B: The other position	“I hear that you are afraid of...” “What I need you to understand is...” “What I can offer is...” “What I cannot promise is...”

What became clearer after the dialogue?

What does each side need?

Was the conflict different from what I originally thought?

Exercise 10 — From prediction to experiment

A Gestalt experiment is a small action or awareness practice that allows new experience. It is not a demand to stop being anxious.

My anxious prediction is:

The smallest experiment I could try is:

What information could this experiment give me?

Shift

From “How can I become certain?” to “What can I discover through contact with reality?”

Exercise 11 — Build support

Gestalt work emphasizes support. Sometimes anxiety does not require more courage; it requires more support.

Internal support: skills, knowledge, values, experiences, abilities:

Relational support: people I can contact:

Environmental support: time, information, boundaries, space, transport, planning:

Body support: food, sleep, movement, sensory regulation, medical care:

Information I actually need:

Exercise 12 — Integration

Right now, I notice:

I am imagining:

I feel:

My body is doing:

I seem to want:

I am also aware that:

What I need is:

What I cannot know yet is:

What I can do now is:

The Gestalt reframe

Use this structure to combine the work into one present-centered statement.

Template

Right now, I notice myself imagining _____. When I imagine this, I feel _____ and notice _____ in my body. I want _____, and I am also afraid of _____. What is actually happening right now is _____. What I cannot know yet is _____. I need _____. The next thing I can experiment with is _____.

My Gestalt reframe:

Example: presentation anxiety

Original thought: “I am going to embarrass myself and everyone will think I am incompetent.”

Step	Example
What is happening now	I have a presentation tomorrow and I am preparing.
What I imagine	People noticing every mistake and deciding I should not be here.
Body	Tight chest, raised shoulders, shallow breathing.
Impulse	Cancel the presentation.
Ground	I prepared. I know the material. I am tired. I cannot know exactly how people will respond.
Experiment	Deliver the first five minutes without monitoring everyone’s faces.

Integrated statement: “Right now, I am imagining public humiliation. My body reacts as though that future is already happening. I care about being competent, and another part of me wants protection from judgment. The presentation has not happened yet. I can prepare, allow imperfection, present the first section, and discover what actually happens.”

Questions for deeper processing

- What happens in me when I say the worry aloud?
- What has become the most urgent part of my experience?
- What disappears from awareness when anxiety becomes dominant?
- What future am I mentally living in?
- How am I physically organizing myself for that imagined future?
- What do I want to do?
- What am I stopping myself from doing?
- What need sits beneath this anxiety?
- What is the anxiety trying to protect?
- What rule am I following?
- What opposite desire is also present?
- What would make contact with this situation more possible?
- What choices actually exist?
- What can I do that would give me new information?

Best-use boundaries

- Use this worksheet for reflection, psychoeducation, and manageable anxiety.
- Use qualified clinical support for severe, persistent, or destabilizing symptoms.
- Do not treat what emerges in a workshop as proof of a particular history, diagnosis, or explanation.
- The work is not to perform insight. The work is to notice, support, choose, and experiment.

Evidence note

Gestalt therapy has a legitimate clinical and research tradition, but it has been studied far less extensively than approaches such as CBT. Claims should remain proportionate to the evidence.

- Bretz, Heekerens, and Schmitz (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of 38 Gestalt therapy studies and found Gestalt therapy generally effective and not inferior to comparison psychotherapies, while noting limits in long-term and differential-indication conclusions.
- Raffagnino (2019) reviewed 11 more recent empirical studies and described promising results while emphasizing the limited and methodologically uneven evidence base.
- Kaisler et al. (2023) used a mixed-method multiple-case design with seven clients receiving 30 sessions, offering useful process detail but not broad efficacy proof.
- Calvet et al. (2025) prospectively studied 319 people with mood and/or anxiety-related problems and found pre-post improvements, but the study was observational and had no control group.

Responsible summary

Gestalt therapy is an established experiential psychotherapy with a developing empirical literature. Existing research suggests potential benefits for distress, including anxiety, but the anxiety-specific evidence base remains smaller than that of several more extensively studied therapies.

Further reading

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