

RESOURCE 02

From “What If?” to “What Is”

A Gestalt-informed processing workshop for anxiety
and anxious thoughts.

AWARENESS

BODY

CONTACT

EXPERIMENT



90 minutes • educational + reflective • not psychotherapy

Scope + safety

Use the resource as psychoeducation, guided reflection, or a low-intensity workshop.

This resource is

- An introduction to Gestalt processing
- A structured anxiety worksheet
- A translation-friendly workshop deck
- A way to notice anxiety as a whole experience

This resource is not

- Diagnosis or crisis support
- Trauma processing
- A substitute for therapy, supervision or clinical training
- A promise that anxiety will disappear

The Gestalt shift

Gestalt does not begin by arguing with the anxious thought. It asks what is happening as the thought appears.

Instead of starting with:
“Is this thought true or false?”

Begin with:
“What happens in me right now as I imagine this?”

The reframe comes through awareness, embodiment, context, support and a small experiment — not forced positivity.

What is Gestalt therapy?

A holistic, present-centered, experiential approach to how people organize experience.



Gestalt = the organized whole

An anxious thought is not only a sentence. It belongs to a whole field of body, emotion, image, behavior and relationship.

THOUGHT

“Something will go wrong.”

BODY

Tight jaw, shallow breath, scanning.

ACTION

Avoid, rehearse, ask, freeze, check.

FIELD

People, history, context, support, uncertainty.

Gestalt processing widens the frame so anxiety becomes something to meet, understand and respond to.

A brief history

Gestalt therapy developed in the 1940s-1950s through psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, phenomenology, existentialism, field theory and embodied practice.

1930s

Fritz and Laura Perls leave Nazi Germany; psychoanalytic roots evolve.

1951

Perls, Hefferline & Goodman publish the foundational text.

1960s

Gestalt grows through institutes, groups and experiential practice.

Today

Contemporary Gestalt is more relational, contextual, trauma-aware and collaborative.

Core principles for this workshop

These are the concepts participants will use directly.

AWARENESS

Notice sensing, feeling, imagining, moving, wanting and avoiding.

HERE + NOW

Explore past and future as they appear in present experience.

FIGURE + GROUND

What has become dominant? What else is here?

CONTACT

How am I meeting or avoiding what is here?

POLARITIES

Two true positions may coexist inside one person.

EXPERIMENT

Try something small to discover new information.

The paradoxical theory of change

Change is often helped by contacting what is, rather than forcing yourself to become what you think you should be.

For anxiety, that means we do not begin with:

“I should be calm.”

“I should be certain.”

“I should be over this.”

We begin with:

“Anxiety is here.”

“My chest is tight.”

“I am imagining rejection.”

“I need support.”

How Gestalt understands anxiety

Anxiety often pulls a person into an imagined future. Gestalt brings attention back to present experience.



Anxiety as future-living

The body is here, but attention is rehearsing a future that has not happened yet.

WHAT IS

“I sent the message two hours ago.”

WHAT IF

“They are angry. I ruined it. I will be abandoned.”

The first move is not to erase the future story. It is to recognize it as a future story.

Anxiety as interrupted movement

A Gestalt question: what wants to happen under the anxiety?

Notice the energy beneath anxiety:

- speak
- ask
- leave
- approach
- prepare
- protest
- rest
- set a boundary

Important note

This is a Gestalt formulation, not a full biomedical explanation of anxiety. Use it as an experiential question, not a universal fact.

What “reframing” means here

Gestalt reframing is not forced reassurance. It is fuller contact with reality.

FROM
“I am going to fail.”

THROUGH
“I notice fear, tightness, images of
judgment, and an urge to disappear.”

TO
“I can prepare, ask for support,
and try one small experiment.”

The thought becomes contextualized: present fact, imagined future, body cue, need, support and next action.

The workshop flow

A 90-minute sequence from grounding to worksheet to experiment.



Workshop map

Keep the sequence simple: arrive, notice, differentiate, explore, experiment, integrate.

1 Arrive
Orient to present

2 Choose
One workable
thought

3 Notice
Body, emotion,
image

4 Separate
What is / what if

5 Explore
figure, ground,
polarity

6 Experiment
Small next action

Exercise 1 — Arrive in the present

The point is not to calm down. The point is to locate yourself.

Look around and write:

- 3 things I see
- 2 sounds I hear
- 1 body sensation
- How my breath feels
- Anxiety: 0-10

Facilitator line

“You do not have to relax. Just notice where you are.”

Exercise 2 — Choose one anxious thought

Work with one worry that feels meaningful but manageable.

Write the thought exactly as it appears:

“ _____ ”

Then ask:

“When I believe this thought, what future am I already imagining?”

Choose everyday anxiety, not the most traumatic or overwhelming material.

Exercise 3 — From story to experience

Move from explanation to direct awareness.

Body: where do I feel this?

Emotion: what feelings are here?

Image: what scene does my mind show?

Impulse: what does my body want to do?

Behavior: what do I usually do?

Relationship: whose reaction matters?

Exercise 4 — What is vs. what if

This is the core anxiety separation.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW

Only observable or currently known facts.

“I have not received a reply yet.”

“I have a meeting tomorrow.”

“I am sitting at my desk.”

WHAT AM I IMAGINING?

Future scenes, predictions and rehearsals.

“They are angry.”

“I will fail.”

“Everyone will reject me.”

Exercise 5 — Figure and ground

Anxiety often makes one threat feel like the whole reality.

FIGURE

What feels enormous, urgent or impossible to ignore?

GROUND

What else belongs to the situation?

Prompt: “What has disappeared from awareness while anxiety became dominant?”

Exercise 6 — Language experiment

Change the wording to make awareness more precise.

Instead of
“I am anxious.”

Try
“I notice anxiety right now.”

Instead of
“This will happen.”

Try
“I notice myself imagining this.”

Instead of
“I can’t.”

Try
“I am afraid to / I need support to.”

Exercise 7 — What is anxiety trying to do?

Approach anxiety as information before treating it as a problem.

My anxiety seems to be trying to protect me from...

It wants certainty about...

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

Ask both:
Is this need relevant?
Is this strategy helping?

Exercise 8 — Body + impulse

Anxiety often includes a stopped or unsupported movement.

Notice changes in:

- breath
- posture
- hands
- face / jaw
- movement

Then ask:

“What does my body seem to want to do?”

“What stops me?”

Exercise 9 — Polarities

Anxiety may contain two real needs, not one wrong thought.

One part of me wants...

Another part of me wants...

Examples: speak / hide • closeness / distance • freedom / control • try / be certain first

Optional — Two-chair dialogue

Use only if participants have enough stability, choice and privacy.

Chair A: anxious position

“I am afraid that...”

“I need...”

“I am trying to prevent...”

Chair B: other position

“I hear that...”

“What I need you to know is...”

“What I can offer is...”

Keep it gentle. No one has to perform intensity.

Exercise 10 — From prediction to experiment

Experiments give information. They do not force a feeling to disappear.

Prediction

“What do I fear will happen?”

Small experiment

“What can I try safely?”

Information

“What could this teach me?”

Shift from “How do I become certain?” to “What can I discover through contact with reality?”

Build support

Gestalt work asks what support makes contact possible.

Internal
skills, values,
experience

Relational
people, care,
consultation

Environmental
time, space, money,
access

Body
food, sleep, movement,
medical care

The Gestalt reframe

A full statement integrates present fact, imagined future, body, need and next action.

Right now, I notice myself imagining _____.
When I imagine this, I feel _____ and notice _____ in my body.
What is actually happening right now is _____.
What I cannot know yet is _____.
I need _____.
The next experiment is _____.

Example: presentation anxiety

The anxious thought is not deleted. It becomes more differentiated.

Original thought

“I’m going to embarrass myself and everyone will think I’m incompetent.”

Integrated statement

“I notice myself imagining public humiliation. My body reacts as if it is already happening. I care about being competent and I need support. The presentation has not happened yet. I can prepare, present the first section, and discover what actually happens.”

Evidence + responsible use

Gestalt has meaningful clinical literature, but claims should stay proportionate to the evidence.



Evidence check

The empirical literature is supportive but smaller and less anxiety-specific than CBT's evidence base.

Supportive findings

- 1994 meta-analysis: Gestalt was effective and not inferior to comparable therapies.
- Recent studies show promise in mood/anxiety-related distress.

Limits

- Many studies are small, older, naturalistic or uncontrolled.
- A 2025 study of 319 clients found pre-post improvement, but no control group.

Best-use boundaries

Experiential work should increase choice, not overwhelm people.

Always allow participants to pass, pause, keep material private, stop an exercise, keep eyes open and stay seated.

Do not use this workshop for acute crisis, uncontrolled panic, significant dissociation, psychosis, suicidality or trauma processing without appropriate clinical support.

Further reading

Use these as the core resource list for students, therapists and facilitators.

Foundational

Perls, Hefferline & Goodman — Gestalt Therapy

Clinical introductions

Joyce & Sills — Skills in Gestalt Counselling & Psychotherapy

Woldt & Toman — Gestalt Therapy: History, Theory, and Practice

Theory + dialogue

Yontef — Awareness, Dialogue and Process

Beisser — The Paradoxical Theory of Change

Research

Bretz et al. 1994; Raffagnino 2019; Kaisler et al. 2023; Calvet et al. 2025

Sources

Selected sources used to build this resource.

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