

ABSTRACT

A study using phenomenological research methods was undertaken to explore clients' experience of touch being used as a therapeutic intervention in Gestalt psychotherapy. In-depth interviews were carried out with five long-term clients who had been in ongoing Gestalt psychotherapy for at least two years and who had experienced their therapists' use of touch as significant.

Findings showed that clients experienced touch as positive and appropriate, and that therapists had demonstrated an ability to create safe, ethical boundaries, stay present, be attuned and sensitive to clients, and communicate warmth, support and acceptance through touch.

Therapists' use of touch facilitated clients to contact blocked feelings, and helped them undo retroflected needs for physical contact and holding. The therapists' human response to these unmet needs facilitated the clients' grieving for the nurturing contact they had missed in childhood, and restarted a developmental process which had been interrupted, thereby bringing about growth and integration.

Gestalt psychotherapy does not have a developmental theory of its own. It is important that developmental theory is integrated into Gestalt therapy as there is a need for therapists to be aware of and understand developmental issues when using touch.

Therapists who decide to use touch with clients need to be clear about their own issues relating to touch. To do this they need to have worked through these in their personal therapy with therapists who demonstrate competent, appropriate, and therapeutic use of touch. The use of touch as a therapeutic intervention deserves serious time and attention on training programmes and is too important to dismiss or sideline as 'too risky' to be used.