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Gestalt Relational Integrative Principles

Ideas and Skills for Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice

Gestalt Relational Integrative Principles (GRIP™) for exploring and understanding the experiential worlds of people: An integrative approach to psychotherapy and life

Overview Statement: The worldview that underpins the Gestalt Relational Integrative Principles (**GRIP™**) approach considers that human experience occurs in a context where people are mutually influencing each other. This interconnected and interdependent worldview also understands that people make sense of their experience based on their unique perspective. Meaning is personal, context related and clarified through interaction. From this perspective while our stories are singular our destinies are shared and merged.

Integrative relational Gestalt seeks to explore the experiential world/s of people as an act of collaboration between people by focusing on the process of consciousness (i.e. aware mindfulness) and the practice of inquiring into emerging experience. In this perspective change occurs through allowing experience to arise in the inquiry process and then creatively experimenting with any new sensations, feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Health is indicated by dynamism, flexibility and responsiveness across a spectrum of human experience including the physical, psychological and spiritual.

The GRIP™ approach has been distilled into 15 gestalt relational integrative principles, elaborating essence statements and related concepts. The 15 principles refer to: reality, influence, experience, meaning, time, inquiry, interaction, intervention, self, awareness, interpretation, change, health, agency and development. These foundation principles form the basis of an integrative approach to understanding human experience and applying it to counselling and psychotherapy, as well as life in general. This integrative approach includes ideas and practices from Gestalt therapy, depth psychology, psychodynamic approaches to psychotherapy and the Diamond Approach to spiritual development.



Principle 1

Reality is perspectival and constructivist.

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Essence Statement: Reality is an interplay between the world of experience (i.e. the objective or true nature of things - actuality) and how the world of experience is perceived (i.e. the subjective perception of things). The perception of reality is derived from a unique personal vantage point. It is filtered through the lens of the perceiver's context, personal history, personality and associated ideas, concepts, identities and desires.

Perception and reality are dynamic and intersubjective processes as the perceiver and the perceived mutually influence each other. Constructed reality changes as a result of this intersubjective and interactive process. While perception is singular (i.e. unique and bounded) it is not separate (i.e. unrelated to the field); while reality has form (i.e. organisation and continuity) it also has flow (i.e. dynamism and fluidity).

Gestalt concepts: Field Theory; field theory principle of singularity; field theory principle of organisation; field theory principle of contemporaneity; field theory principle of changing process; Gestalt psychology; figure and ground formation; completion.

Related concepts: Perception; embeddedness; Cartesian and post-Cartesian paradigm; constructivism; constructionism; contextualism; perspectival realism, epistemology



Principle 2

Influence is reciprocal and recursive.

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Essence Statement: Influence is always mutual. It is a dynamic process occurring between the interdependent experiential worlds of people. Experience is co-constructed; it is the product of a fluid process of influencing and being influenced. People are subjected to experience (i.e. inextricably embedded in it and influenced) as well as participating in its construction (i.e. inextricably embedded in it and influencing). The influencing process is not only reciprocal (i.e. given and felt by each toward the other) it is also recursive (i.e. involves repeated and complementary responding by each toward the other). The essence of influence is that it is mutual, circular and repetitive.

Gestalt concepts: Field theory; field theory principle of possible relevance; field theory principle of changing process; contact; contact boundary; contact styles and processes; responsibility; self and environmental support.

Related concepts: Intersubjectivity; transference and countertransference; co-transference; needed and repeated relationships; rupture and repair sequence; core organising themes.



Principle 3

Experience is holistic, inclusive and unfolding.

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Essence Statement: Lived experience is multifaceted and interconnected. While experience has constituent parts (e.g. sensations, thoughts, feelings, behaviour) it is the relationship of the parts to each other rather than the nature of the parts that is of primary interest. The unitary nature of experience (i.e. indivisible and holistic) means that nothing can be fully understood when it is separated from the whole system of which it is a part. The interactive and interdependent nature of the constituent parts of experience (i.e. its dynamism) ensures that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts.

The indivisible unity of experience means that nothing can be excluded; and where attempts are made to do so the essential intelligence and harmony of self-experience is disrupted (i.e. splits and polarisations occur). The essence of lived experience is that it is unified (i.e. everything is connected), radically inclusive (i.e. everything is included) and unfolding (i.e. dynamically arising in the present moment).

Gestalt concepts: Holism; polarities; unified field; field sensitive practice; paradoxical theory of change; present-centred experience; awareness.

Related concepts: Dualism; mindfulness, mindful awareness.



Principle 4

Meaning is complex, organised and organising.

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Essence Statement: Meaning is derived from the inseparable and simultaneous activities of perceiving and interpreting the phenomena that comprises experience. When functioning well people perceive in wholes that seamlessly includes the meaning. As lived experience is multifaceted then any derived meaning requires a degree of complexity to adequately account for the nature of things. Simple, linear explanations for multifactorial events are reductionistic and therefore neither sufficiently account for the multiple influences shaping experience nor the effect of the system as a whole.

People are meaning makers; it is their best attempt to make sense of their current experience and orient to what is next. This is a dynamic, unfolding and intersubjective process that is also organising in nature. As a person makes sense of their experience this in turn organises further meaning making. This recursive loop is an organising process; meaning shapes meaning. The interpersonal nature of the process engages people in a process of making sense together.

Gestalt concepts: Field theory principle of possible relevance; figure and ground formation; Gestalt psychology.

Related concepts: Phenomenology, hermeneutics; epistemology



Principle 5

Time is continuous and immediate.

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Essence Statement: Time is continuous; there is no fixed or objective boundary between the past, the present and the future. Time seamlessly unfolds with then, now and next comprising an inseparable, continuous whole. While the traditional epochs of time (i.e. past, present and future) are indivisible, our experience is customarily catalogued and languaged “as if” they are discrete (i.e. we have a phenomenological experience of time). For example, personal history (commonly understood as lived experience that occurred before a person’s immediate experience) and personal future (commonly understood as lived experience that occurs after a person’s immediate experience) suggest time is discrete rather than continuous. However, while the only time is present time it includes the real experience of other times such as the memorised experience of yesterday and the anticipated experience of tomorrow.

This perspective on time imbues the present moment with all that has come before and all that is anticipated and locates the act of remembering and anticipating in the unifying time frame of now. Immediacy (i.e. present experience) unifies arbitrary divisions of the time continuum. The contemporaneous nature of time means that the past is a remembered past embedded in the present, just and the future is an anticipated future embedded in the present.

Gestalt concepts: Field theory principle of contemporaneity; field theory principle of changing process; present-centredness (here-and-now experience), awareness continuum.

Related concepts: Immediacy; unfoldment ; mindfulness.



Principle 6

Inquiry is phenomenological and experiential.

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Essence Statement: Inquiry is a concentrated, aware, mindful, dynamic, multidimensional investigation into experience. All experience has contributing, interrelated, constituent parts including thoughts, feelings, sensations, actions, and related senses, energy, embodied patterns, memories and fantasies. The attributed meaning from any inquiry is derived from experiencing, observing and interpreting the multifaceted dimensions of the emergent phenomena that is being explored.

The phenomenological method of inquiry is based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are and as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness. While the inquiry process is filtered through the lens of the perceiver, indicating that one dimension of the inquiry process is subjective in nature, it also takes into account that reality is more than what people perceive (i.e. there are realities that are beyond human perception). The interplay between grasping the subjective and the objective realms of experience are essential to ensuring an inquiry process that is radically inclusive and holistic.

The inquiry process is interested in both the construction and deconstruction of experience; simultaneously fascinated by the building blocks and the building (i.e. the parts and the whole that is greater than the sum of the parts). Experiential inquiry primarily attends to the experience, observation and description of emerging present-centred experience, but does not exclude associated inferences or reasoning. Bringing curiosity to the process of experiencing, noticing and then describing emerging phenomena with an attitude of acceptance and equanimity are hallmarks of the discovery process in effective and expansive inquiry.

Gestalt concepts: Existential phenomenology; phenomenological method; bracketing; description; horizontalisation; field theory principle of uniqueness. **Related concepts:** Subjectivity; transcendental phenomenology; hermeneutic phenomenology; hermeneutic circle; ontology; epistemology.



Principle 7

Interaction is dialogic and existential.

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Essence Statement: Interaction is a process of exchange; it is mutually influencing communication at the boundary between reciprocally interacting subjectivities (i.e. the experiential worlds of people). In this interactive process people strive, through self-aware, awake presence, to grasp the experiential world of the other “as if” from that person’s perspective. This reciprocal interplay and felt responsiveness enhances the likelihood that everyone involved in, and committed to the dialogue, is confirmed in their experience and changed. Such intersubjectivity not only creates understanding as people make sense together; it also creates a dynamic intersubjective field that generates energy for transformational dialogue.

Impermeable boundaries (i.e. the person as a separate entity with a unique identity) are replaced by a radical “person-in-relation” model of human relating (i.e. people are interconnected and all experience is emergent phenomenon of a field). As a consequence a person's intrapsychic experience is understood to be related to interpersonal and contextual influences and vice versa (i.e. a person is "of a field" and is not only organised by it but organising it). While this style of interaction is best characterised as dialogic the content is existential (i.e. it is derived from experience or the experience of existence). People talk about what matters to them (i.e. the reality of their experience) as it emerges in the present and arising from being embedded in relationship.

Gestalt concepts: Dialogic existentialism; presence; inclusion; commitment to dialogue; confirmation; I-it attitude; I-Thou attitude.

Related concepts: Therapeutic relationship; empathy; affect attunement; transparency; self-disclosure; emotional courage; therapeutic alliance.



Principle 8

Intervention is experimental and collaborative.

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Essence Statement: Trying out new possibilities is essential to growth. Interventions aim to expand awareness, heal wounds, enhance choice, ease constrictions, encourage responsibility and facilitate agency. People often feel constrained from sensing, thinking, feeling and behaving differently because their existing relationships and lifespace negatively impinges on them or is interpreted in ways that suggest new experience is not possible. Creating and recognising "good-enough" conditions for risk-taking, especially sufficient support, are a necessary precondition for experimenting.

Experiments are here-and-now opportunities for expansion. They often emerge from the present moment, are intentional, and imbued with the paradox of being a "safe emergency" (i.e. maintaining a dynamic balance between support and challenge). An experimental methodology is a framework for intervening that supports and calibrates the intensity of a person's experience from exposure to new possibilities while maintaining sufficient challenge and novelty for development.

Intervening emerges from interaction; ideas about new experience arise from people talking together about what matters to them. Just as a single person cannot own a dialogue, experiments are conceived as acts of collaboration. Involving any domain of experience (e.g. sensation, thoughts, feelings, actions) experiments are born of need that is often uncovered in dialogue. The resulting possibilities for growth through novel experience are negotiated, co-designed and co-enacted; and once completed made sense of together.

Gestalt concepts: Experiment; grading and calibration; support and challenge continuum; safe emergency; two-chair work.

Related concepts: Creativity; pragmatics.



Principle 9

Self is developmental, emergent and contextual.

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Essence Statement: Self is continuously unfolding; while self has a structure that is formed through the impressions of a person's personal history it is also fluid and emergent in response to contact. Paradoxically self has form (i.e. people are entities with identities - structured and enduring) and flow (i.e. people are emergent and evolving - fluid and novel).

Self is developmental; it has a personal history (i.e. a development story). This experience of self can be characterised as a person's personality that manifests as enduring relational patterns and core organising themes (i.e. form). However, the experience of self is of a self embedded in relationship and of a field; never separate always related and relating. This dynamic process ensures that another experience of the self is that it is emergent; what comes into the foreground is responsive to the context. From this perspective (i.e. flow) the experience of self is created in the moment and related to the environment.

Continuity expressed through habitual patterns of adapting and relating suggests a structured self rather than an emergent self. However, holding the paradox of form and flow is required for a holistic understanding of self. For example, people have memory and recognise themselves with familiarity and predictability (e.g. "that's the sort of person I am") just as they are reassured by a sense of themselves as capable of change and development.

A radically relational self unavoidably possesses a personal history and ways of being in the world that emerge in the present in response to the current field conditions (i.e. the lifespace of the person). In this way form is manifested, sometimes as a more fixed structure and sometimes as a more flexible structure; but always as inseparable from a developmental ground. Alternatively, flow is manifested variously as novelty, fluidity, spontaneity and creativity as the experience of self unfolds in response to the immediate context.

Gestalt concepts: Contact; contact boundary; self; I-boundaries.

Related concepts: Personality; character styles; developmental theory; core organising themes.



Principle 10

Awareness is embodied, unfolding, mindful and situational.

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Essence Statement: Awareness involves the capacity to notice (i.e. purposefully pay attention), to recognise (i.e. perceive in a meaningful way), to be in touch (i.e. contactful connection) and to allow (i.e. non-judgmentally accept) immediate experience. As experience is always embodied the primary touchstone for awareness relates to embodied states. This form of vigilant contact with immediate embodiment becomes a pathway to the present. The experience of present-centred awareness is characterised by a felt sense of "what is" (i.e. the totality of experience) including immediacy, openness, resistance, permissiveness, judgment, clarity, confusion, spaciousness and contraction. To be aware supports a person's capacity for wholeness; awareness seamlessly unifies and integrates – body, mind, heart, soul and the environment.

Awareness as a form of noticing and concentration allows people's here-and-now perceiving to manifest in their consciousness; (i.e. experiencing the ebb and flow of emergent experience holistically and mindfully). Characterised by dynamism (i.e. continuous change, activity, progress and vigor) awareness is unfolding moment by moment. Central to the awareness process (i.e. paying attention on purpose in the present moment) is adopting a non-judgmental stance (i.e. observing experience as it emerges in the moment without rejecting it or trying to change it). In a self-realised form such openness and acceptance supports the dual goals of aware mindfulness; that we can simultaneously come to know ourselves and be ourselves in the present.

The experience of personal awareness does not separate experience from the context in which it arises and unfolds. There is a dynamic relationship between unfolding awareness and the situation in which a person is located; awareness is always *in situ*. Noticing, recognising, experiencing and allowing (i.e. the capacities for being aware) are influenced by the environment and in turn influence the environment (i.e. the awareness process is reciprocal and recursive).

Gestalt concepts: Awareness; inner zone awareness; middle zone awareness; outer zone awareness. **Related concepts:** Mindfulness; unconscious; consciousness; insight; embodiment.



Principle 11

Interpretation is provisional and fallible.

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Essence Statement: Interpretation is the best effort of both the perceiver and the perceived to make sense of experience. It is a tool to assist meaning-making. The interrelated constituent phenomena that comprise experience are perceived as meaningful wholes and given a cohesive explanation. We tend to perceive in wholes rather than discrete elements of experience.

Given the subjective and intersubjective nature of experience the attribution of meaning is unique and changeable through the process of mutual influence. For this reason, interpretation (i.e. the process of attributing meaning) is provisional (i.e. ascribed meaning is accepted or adopted tentatively and conditionally “as if” any idea is on probation).

An interpretive sensibility is characterised by holding ideas lightly (i.e. flirting with rather than marrying a hypothesis) and is enhanced by an attitude of fallibility. To be fallible in the interpreting process is to be aware of how the lens of the perceiver may deceive and contribute to erroneous conclusions. The willingness to be mistaken encourages a provisional stance in the discovery process and a willingness to engage in open minded dialogue.

Gestalt concepts: Field theory principle of uniqueness; descriptive interpretation; analytic interpretation, phenomenological method, bracketing, rule of epoche, rule of description, rule of horizontalisation.

Related concepts: Gestalt psychology; fallibilism; interpretation.



Principle 12

Change is incessant, expansive, paradoxical and present-centred.

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Essence Statement: Incessant movement, manifesting as evolution, transformation and expansion is the natural state of things. One way that change is facilitated is by noticing and embracing personal experience rather than moving away or rejecting it; even when the experience in question is troubling, unwelcome and resulting in contraction. From this perspective to be able to get to somewhere new involves a person knowing where they are to begin with. This apparent paradox (i.e. embracing “what is” as a pathway to experience what is desired) involves a radical commitment to immediate experience.

This paradoxical process of change involves not just a permissive attitude to what is emerging in the present moment but an abundance of personal and environmental support. Awareness with non-judgmental compassion creates the "good enough" conditions for being present to immediate experience. This is a particular challenge when personal awareness brings people into contact with the very experiences they wish to change or even avoid. At these times a common reflex is to express a preference for experiences other than those manifesting by judging, rejecting and moving away. Transforming one experience into another experience involves both internal and external support. This interrelationship between self and other provides the courage to attend and the means to move.

Being present to moment by moment, unfolding experience allows the transition from here to next as a fluid process. In the absence of pushing for change and allowing what is, the next thing organically emerges. This aware process in the presence of support, with its own intrinsic intelligence and dynamism, creates change.

Gestalt concepts: Paradoxical theory of change; creative indifference; fertile void; contacting processes; present-centredness; figure and ground.

Related concepts: Space; unfoldment, aware mindfulness.



Principle 13

Health is functionally flexible and contextually responsive.

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Essence Statement: The essence of health is integration (i.e. flexible and responsive). When people “get stuck” and don’t feel well in themselves, often they have lost flexibility in response to the challenges in their life. For example, they may be trying to superimpose old and simple solutions on new and complex problems; they may be responding in habitual ways to novel circumstances, or; they may be relying on a narrow range of responses when broader skills are required. What was once adaptive and creative has come to be unresponsive and fixed; what was once a “goodness of fit” response has become outmoded. Health is restored, or has a greater chance of being established, when flexibility and choice are restored; what is stuck can begin to flow again. This holistic process ensures that stuckness is examined from multiple perspectives including the domains of physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, psychological and spiritual experience.

Healthy functioning is characterised by a capacity to be responsive to what is required in the prevailing context. For example, if the only response available is to take action when what is most adaptive is a capacity to reflect and be in touch with feelings then a person is not optimally responsive. Developing capacity, in addition to being flexible and relevant in functioning, optimises health. There is a continuous interplay between accessing relevant self-capacities and the challenges of the environment. The feedback loop essential to this interplay is most functional (i.e. demonstrating health) when it is flexible and responsive to the existing conditions in the field.

Gestalt concepts: Creative adjustment; fixed gestalt; unfinished business; organismic self-regulation; cycle of experience (sensation, awareness, mobilisation, action, contact, assimilation, withdrawal); contact styles and processes (introjecting and questioning; projecting and owning; retroreflecting and expressing; desensitising and hypersensitivity; deflecting and deepening; confluence and differentiating; egotism and spontaneity); field theory principle of changing process.

Related concepts:



Principle 14

Agency is choiceful, goal directed, hopeful, responsible and communal.

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Essence Statement: Agency, the belief and experience of being able to make things that personally matter happen, is powered by choice. Agency is a means of exerting power or influence so that something chosen is obtained or achieved. The goal directed nature of agency needs to be imbued with choice and hope. A sense of hope comprises positive thoughts about having both the ability to produce workable pathways to a desired goal and having the ability to begin and continue following an identified pathway to a chosen goal. The absence of agency thinking produces a sense of powerlessness to achieve change. Choice and goals are like a compass; hope and support are wind in the sails.

The process of making goal achievement more viable is a mutual process; a shared responsibility. A person who is demoralised about change needs supportive inspiration to reactivate lost confidence in their own problem-solving and action-taking capacity. Responsibility (i.e. an investment and commitment) and hope need to reside in all parties in the dialogue and where they are absent the challenge is to resurrect its presence.

The reactivation of an optimistic attitude and positive expectancy for goal attainment involves creating a plan and pathways of action. This is a choiceful process and includes a person claiming their agency and taking responsibility both individually and as an act of collaboration. Agency does not flourish in a vacuum; it requires communal responsiveness. Agency involves directedness; a movement towards what is desired and chosen with a sense of hope, responsibility and support from the environment.

Gestalt concepts: Support; choice; responsibility.

Related concepts: Community, ethics.



Principle 15

Development is intelligent, dynamic and integrative.

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Essence Statement: Development is a process of maturation that results from integrating and synthesising unfolding experience. Development is not a random process; it has an inherent intelligence (i.e. there is an underlying order even in apparent chaos). This underlying intelligence is reflected in patterns and pathways; predictable and unique all at once. The essential intelligence of development as a process is observable in how the natural world unfolds (for example in the seasons, one following the other and each with its distinctive qualities); and it is also observable as a maturational process (for example in growth, seed to plant, embryo to animal). The predictability of any developmental pathway does not mitigate the potential for uniqueness in the outcome.

Development is a dynamic process. This expressive, vital, activating and transforming dynamism drives personal maturation which in turn develops the field as a whole and similarly as the field matures as a whole this in turn facilitates personal development. Development is an expression of totality; it is inclusive, holistic and integrative.

Gestalt concepts: Field theory principle of changing process.

Related concepts: