

# The healing journey: Dealing with “unfinished business”

By Thomas Wood



**F**ritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, spoke often of “unfinished business,” memories from the past that intrude on the present. Gestalt therapy provides powerful tools for achieving resolution and peace in such situations.

The place to begin on your healing journey is with what hurts the most. In your heart of hearts, you know what that is—the one issue that really affects you on a daily or weekly basis. It may be the loss of a relationship, loved one, job or way of life; perhaps it is a disappointment or betrayal; or it may be just a feeling of emptiness and a lack of fulfillment when dreams have run into a harsh reality.

Unfinished business can dog us for years. Many patients have unfinished business from their childhoods and teen years that still affect them in their adult lives. This can be especially true in relationship patterns, since we often live our current relationships based on experiences we don't want to repeat from the past.

The goal in all healing is inner peace, and that means acceptance and forgiveness. But we can't jump to acceptance before we've gone through the middle stages in the process. I've worked with many people who sought to live their lives on a spiritual basis with forgiveness first and foremost, only to find themselves mired in unacknowledged anger, sadness and shame. There's no getting around it, when you have these feelings, they have to be acknowledged truly and felt deeply. As both Robert Frost and Dante Alighieri wrote, “The only way out is through.” We can't get out of our feelings without going through them.

Intense feelings are not spiritual failings; they are natural human reactions to loss, failure and disappointment, and an essential part of the grief process. It's important to remember when feelings come up that we need to be in them immediately, but we aren't going to stay there for the rest of our lives. “Just passing through” is our motto for dealing with feelings. We will experience them fully, release them and move on.

Gestalt therapy is extremely effective for moving through unpleasant feelings. Perls understood that feelings usually lay just under the surface and developed a therapeutic method that enabled the patient to experience and understand them in the moment. As he once said, “I have one aim only: to impart a fraction of the meaning of the word ‘now.’” Modern Gestalt therapy has distilled Perls' techniques to make them available to clinicians practicing today.

The “empty chair” exercise is a Gestalt technique that gives the patient the chance to work through thoughts, feelings and memories of absent figures as if they were still present. These emotion-laden conversations can result in catharsis (the release of pent-up feelings) and new insights and understanding. Similarly, “no-send” letters provide a path for acknowledging the thoughts and feelings we usually filter out. Writing and processing a no-send letter can often point the way toward a new perspective on a situation.

David Epston and Michael White's Narrative Therapy provides a crucial next step in the healing process. More on that next month.

This article provides a general overview of certain mental health issues. It is not medical advice. You should consult your mental health provider for a detailed assessment of your own symptoms and circumstances before embarking on any treatment for a mental health issue. ■



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