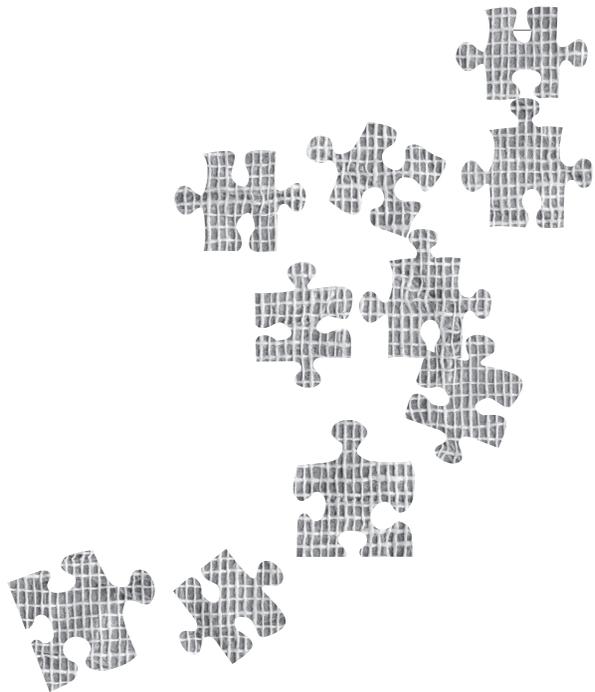


# Gestalt Counselling in Action



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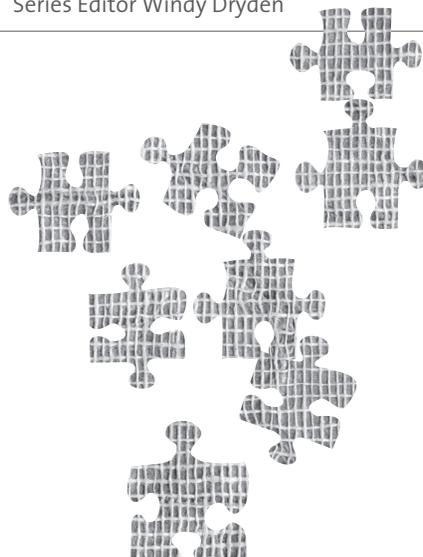
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4th Edition

Petrūska Clarkson  
Updated by Simon Cavicchia

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## The stages of the counselling process related to the flow of the cycle

### Sensation

People commonly become aware of their desire for counselling when there is some internal or external disturbance to the homeostasis of their lives. The hormonal imbalances of adolescence often coincide with emotional storms which bring them and their families to counsellors. Changes in the socioeconomic system (organism–environment field) may also upset the status quo. The miners' strike in Britain precipitated many families into a re-evaluation of their roles, their beliefs and their political allegiances.

Often the first stirrings of discontent are experienced as physical sensation – a recurrent tightness in the chest, a lingering cold, an unforgiving headache or increasingly disturbed breathing.

Frances, a fifty-year-old mother, comes for counselling. She dutifully followed the precepts of her childhood upbringing and identified with the gender stereotypes of the 1950s. Her third child has recently left home for university and she is experiencing feelings of loss and grief as she needs to re-evaluate the meaning of her life after 'her nest has emptied'. Up to this point in her history she has never felt the need for counselling but she is currently bewildered and perplexed by the social, physiological and intellectual changes in her life. Whereas her husband appears less interested in sex, and wishes to spend more time in front of the television, she finds herself more interested in sex than she had been for many years.

### Awareness

This new awareness of herself and her emotional needs acts as a spur to seek counselling. Heightened awareness of her need to talk to someone about these changes in her life makes her more observant of magazine articles discussing personal problems. She finds herself listening to radio phone-ins. She discovers that several of her friends have in the past sought counselling and she enquires about their experiences.

### **Mobilisation**

At the point of mobilisation the tension related to her emerging need becomes energised. Her excitement is manifested in changes in her autonomic nervous system as she experiences a general sense of arousal. She mobilises the relevant resources in herself and in her environment, including an estimate of what counselling might cost. She is willing to open herself emotionally and intellectually to the counselling process. Frances now telephones for an appointment to the counsellor who was recommended by her most trusted friend. A few days later she is to meet her counsellor for the first time. As she travels to his consulting room she experiences an increase in her heart rate, rapid breathing and the excitement of being faced with a novel situation. She recognises that this feeling has some similarities with anxiety, but knows that there is no real danger involved in this exploratory contact. So she looks forward to a rewarding meeting, trusting that even if it is not always a pleasant process, she is bound to learn from the encounter.

### **Action**

This is the stage where Frances goes into action. She chooses and implements appropriate action by organising her perceptual, emotional and behavioural activities with the goal of meeting her primary emergent need. This need she earlier identified as the desire to actualise herself and her potentialities beyond the roles prescribed for her by society. In the first phases of the counselling relationship, most of her emotional and mental energy is concerned with forming a working alliance with her counsellor. She asks him questions about his training, supervision and his position on confidentiality. Using her own judgement and intuition about him as a person, she decides that he is trustworthy and is willing to disclose more and more of herself – even those parts which thus far she has avoided. She can express her anger at the restrictions imposed upon her by an education system, and at male teachers who never seriously considered her scientific potential.

In the counselling relationship she is enabled to experiment and explore her needs; and she is supported in separating herself

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

from expectations of the mother-and-wife role imposed upon her by society and family. She begins to develop a sense of herself as a separate person with heightened sensory awareness and a finely tuned sensitivity to her own physiological and psychological processes. She engages in experiments which help her to consider the messages and self-definitions which she had metaphorically 'swallowed' as a young girl and she begins to review these, deciding which she would like to keep, which to spit out and which to chew, savour and digest.

She experiments with different options for fulfilment in her life such as starting her own business in catering, having an affair, going to university to study as a chemical engineer. She keeps a dream diary, takes up pottery as an expressive medium and seeks out role models of women who change their careers in mid-life.

### **Final contact**

Contact in the counselling process involves full and complete awareness of as many aspects of the problematical situation as possible. The 'stuck point' or 'impasse' has become the total figure which must be resolved before the person can comfortably resume the developmental journey. Often this coincides with the person re-owning his or her full range of emotional responses – rage, fear, sadness and joy.

Getting in touch with and expressing the accumulated hurts and disappointments of her life in the context of an accepting and enabling relationship, empowers Frances to bring all her intellectual, behavioural and psychological resources to bear on her problem.

During this phase, Frances resolves her conflict between what she wants to do, which is to actualise her latent potential and what she used to believe she 'should' do, which is to settle comfortably into middle-aged spread and knit jumpers for her grandchildren.

This period of true contact is the climax of the counselling process, often experienced as a 'metanoia' (a turning about) (Burchfield, 1976: 911). After this the client cannot conceive of returning to her earlier way of being. The significant components in her social system are also affected by her changes. Her husband and children have moved beyond their initial scepticism and insecurities

and are valuing and reinforcing Frances's growing competence and confidence in her newly found self. Her husband is intrigued and excited by her rediscovered sensuality and willingness to take risks in sexual experimentation. Her daughters mourn the loss of 'safe and secure old mum', but also take pride when they attend her graduation ceremony at the university.

### **Satisfaction**

The satisfaction phase marks the enjoyment and integration stage of counselling. No longer are the sessions fraught with conflicting feelings and ambivalent emotions, but there is a clear sense of a developmental task well accomplished. Frances is no longer frustrated and she has overcome some of her initial fears about testing her intelligence and her social skills on campus. She sometimes looks back on her earlier life envying the simplicity of that time when she was less aware of her responsibility to herself. However, the rewards and richness of her full commitment to her path of self-development and self-actualisation seem eminently preferable. The counselling relationship becomes less and less important and the consulting room becomes more a place where she shares the fruits of her awareness and celebrates her successes.

### **Withdrawal**

In the last stages of the healthy cycle of counselling, the client prepares for separation from the counselling relationship. He or she has learnt many of the skills and techniques for enhanced self-awareness and more efficient problem-solving from the counsellor, and can now use these without guidance.

Frances bids the counsellor a fond farewell. She is sad that this contact that has been so nourishing and important for her is now terminating. Yet she is excited and pleased at the prospect of continuing her growth without his assistance. She has built up for herself other supportive structures such as a professional women's networking group which she attends on a regular basis. Her husband has become her friend as well as mate. Her new life, with all its richness and challenge, has become a figure. Her experience with counselling fades into the background.