“Experimentation” – The Technique of Gestalt.

Zinker (Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy, Vintage Books) defines an experiment thus: "A move or series of moves with an unknown outcome... By experimenting we may test out shoulds and oughts and try out new behaviours and attitudes, thoughts and feelings."

He believes that we spend the first two years of life engaged in such experiments with great creativity and are uninhibited by rules and restrictions that we place on ourselves in later life.

The following are some of the forms that an experiment might take:-

1. Enactment or re-enactment. As with any move in therapy, this needs to be "graded" to what the client is willing/able to do. At the simplest level, it means simply allowing the client to tell their story. To enhance this, the therapist may suggest that the client increase their physical mobility as they tell the story i.e. to include non-verbal communication. To enhance it further, the therapist may invite the client to move around the room and "act out" the story - perhaps using props such as "the empty chair". It can be enhanced even more in a group setting by staging a full "psychodrama" i.e. using group members to play other roles in the story.

2. Directed behaviour. The therapist may invite the client to experiment with a new or unusual behaviour. A typical example of this is where the client "does the rounds" of a group i.e. tries making a certain statement to each member to find out what this feels like. Such a statement is typically of an affirming nature e.g. "It is OK for me to assert myself" or "It is OK for me to make my needs and feelings known" etc.

3. Fantasy work. This is useful if the client is not ready to visibly act on what they are thinking and feeling. It can fulfil one or more of these four functions:-
   - To contact a resisted event/feeling/personal characteristic.
   - To contact an unavailable person/situation.
   - To explore the unknown.
   - To explore new or unfamiliar aspects of the self.

Fantasy work can either be guided i.e. with some elements suggested by the therapist, or entirely spontaneous.

4. Dream work. There is much written on how to work with dreams (e.g. The Dream Game by Ann Faraday - Harper & Row, Dream Power by Ann Faraday - Coward, McCann & Geoghan N.Y., Gestalt Therapy Verbatim by Fritz Perls – Real People Press) and this will be covered in a later section. Basically, however, the gestalt approach involves the client identifying with one or more of the "elements" of the dream, either psycho-dramatically or through fantasy work.

5. Homework. This covers any experiment that is taken outside of the session.

6. Awareness work. For verbal communication, may include accurate empathy and
observation, reflective listening, paraphrasing or verbal imagery. Attention can also be drawn to non-verbal communication.

7. Breathing work. Paralysed breathing (i.e. anxiety or “stage fright”) is the single most common form of holding in/controlling feelings. The disadvantage is that air is vital to support our healthy and vital living - it is a form of physical support - and without support we are more likely to stay anxious. There may be implications for how the client does or does not use other forms of support. The therapist may simply draw attention to the client's breathing, may question it or may suggest a change in breathing pattern.

**Aims of experiments.**

1. To expand our repertoire of behaviours, attitudes and feelings.
2. To enable the client to take the initiative.
3. To stimulate experiential learning.
4. To integrate intellectual understanding and motoric expression.
5. To re-discover projected material.
6. To stimulate the integration of conflictual forces within the personality.
7. To dislodge and assimilate introjects (i.e. inflexible, unconscious rules).
8. To stimulate circumstances in which the client can explore and gain "self-support" and strength and learn to be more actively responsible for their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

**Factors reducing effectiveness of experiments.**

1. Too early/inappropriate introduction of experiment.
2. Lack of trust in or fear of therapist/counselling process e.g. "will I be rejected if I do this?".
3. Therapist attempting to fit client in to psychological theories.
4. Client pressurised by therapist.
5. Therapist's interruptions to contact ("defences", "resistances", etc.).
6. Therapist's Sack of support e.g. cognitive support such as knowledge/experience.

7. Client's lack of support.

**Evolution of an experiment.**

According to Zinker, an experiment evolves in the following stages:-

1. "Laying the groundwork". The experiment starts its evolution as soon as the client arrives - if not before! The therapist needs to develop rapport thereby encouraging the client's material to enter.

2. "Negotiating the consensus between therapist and client". Always important in gestalt.

3. "Grading the work in terms of experienced difficulty for the client". We all need support and challenge. If the work is too challenging with insufficient support, the client will suffer. If the work is not challenging enough, then little will be gained. Therapist needs to judge the right levels but if in doubt must negotiate with client.

4. "Surfacing the client's awareness". Awareness work (see above) is very useful for this.

5. "Locating the client's energy". What is happening in the client's body? E.g. is there clenching, twitching, swallowing, restricted breathing/hyperventilation, changes in skin-tone or voice, etc?

6. "Focussing awareness and energy towards the development of a theme". All of the above contribute to this.

7. "Developing self support for both client and therapist". Support is as important for the therapist as for the client. Support has many forms but basically is anything that we need in order to function healthily e.g:-

   - Physical/ biological support (such as breathing or food, comfortable posture and movements).-Ego strength (such as therapist's therapy).
   
   - Situational support (secure home, sufficient income etc. to avoid excessive anxiety).
   
   - Relational support (friends, partners, etc to provide understanding and nurture).
   
   - Transpersonal support (may include relationship with God or the universe, etc).
   
   - "Choosing a particular experiment". Again, negotiating with the client is important.
- "Debriefing the client - insight and understanding". This means engaging the client's cognitive understanding of the experiment, discussing what happened etc.