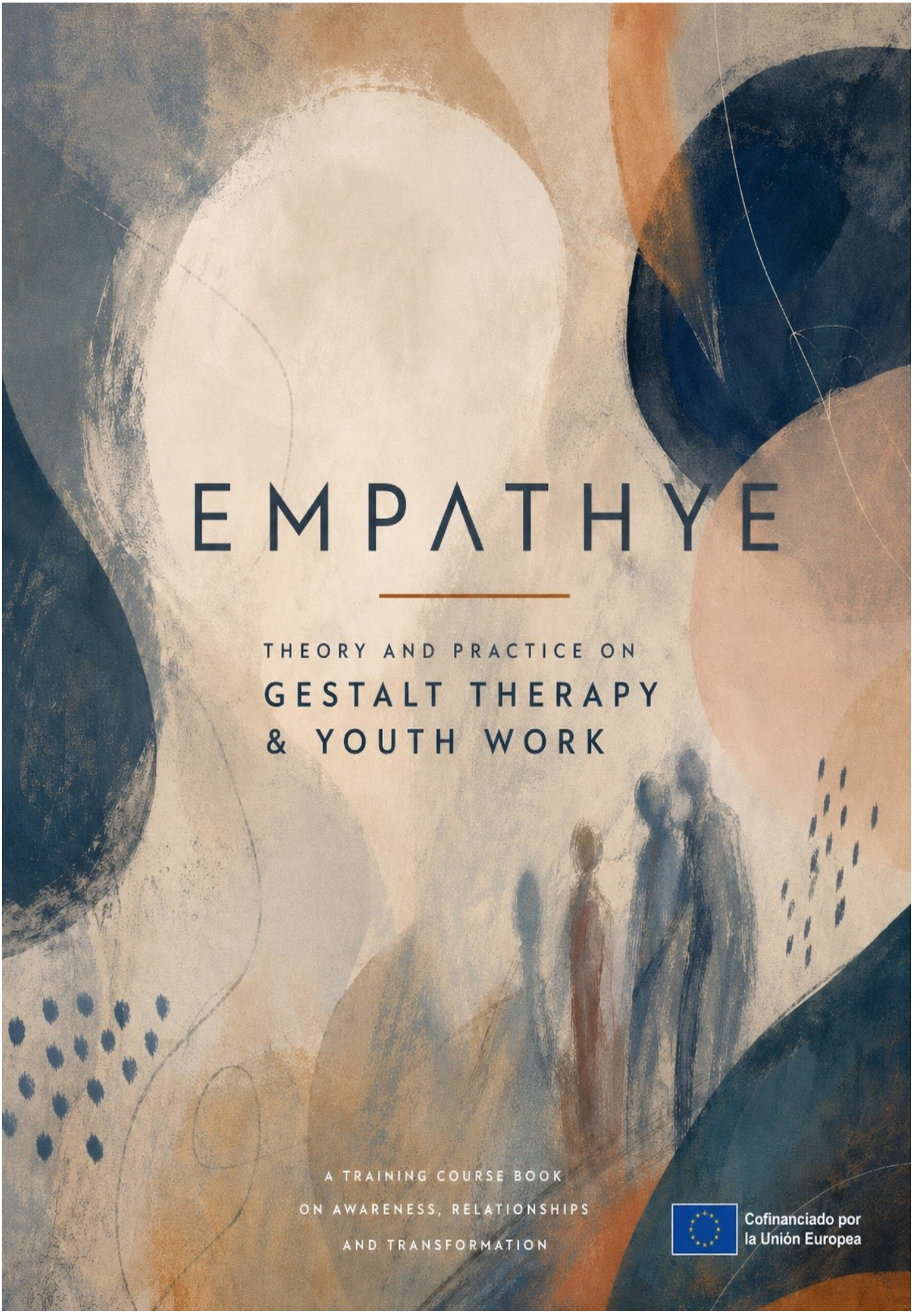
EMPATHYE
THEORY AND PRACTICE ON
GESTALT THERAPY
& YOUTH WORK
A TRAINING COURSE BOOK
ON AWARENESS, RELATIONSHIPS
AND TRANSFORMATION
Cofinanciado por
la Unión Europea

A handbook for psychotherapists, youth workers and educators

EMPATHYE

Conscious Youth Workers and Trainers in Europe

Companion to the Programme

A handbook for integrating Gestalt therapy and Gestalt Theatre into the daily practice of those who work with young people

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Diego Marín Romera

&

Laura López Gámez

Casa del Trigo · La Almudema · 2026

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P R O L O G U E

How to use this book

A note before you begin

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This book is the companion to a training that took place across two residential weeks in Murcia, Spain. If you are reading it, you have probably been part of those weeks. Or you have been close to someone who was, and this book has reached you through them. Either way: welcome.

The pages that follow are not designed to be read straight through, like a novel, although you can do that if you wish. They are designed to be returned to. Different chapters will speak to you at different moments — in the weeks immediately after the training, when the body memory is still fresh; six months later, when a particular situation in your work brings a chapter back to mind; years from now, when you reread something and find it means something completely different than the first time.

A handbook of this kind only works when it is used. Underline. Annotate. Argue with it in the margins. Take notes when something resonates and notes when something does not. The book is meant to live with you, not to sit cleanly on a shelf.

Three layers

There are three layers of material woven together in this book, and it helps to know which one you are reading at any given moment.

1. **Theoretical foundations.** The chapters of the syllabus (Part I and the surrounding theoretical pieces) are the conceptual ground. They explain what Gestalt is, where it comes from, what it offers to youth work specifically. Read these once for orientation, then return to them as needed.

2. **Lived practices.** The handouts in Parts II to VI are the heart of the book. They describe specific practices — the work on character, the place you take in your family, the feared scenes, the mutual therapies, the bridges to youth work — that we did together during the residential weeks. They are written so that you can reconnect with what you experienced, and also so that you can begin to bring elements of them into your own work, with care.

3. **Resources.** Part VII and the Annexes are reference material — bibliographies, the pocket card, the self-inventories, the day-by-day chronicle, the music. These are not meant to be read cover to cover. They are meant to be there when you need them.

A word about the line between roles

This book is read both by psychotherapists and by youth workers, and the two readings are not identical. A psychotherapist meets the practices described here in their clinical room, in a contained therapeutic frame, with a contract that allows for depth. A youth worker meets the same practices in a different setting — a residential, a workshop, an informal conversation in the corridor — without the clinical container. Both readings are legitimate. But the line between them matters, and we name it explicitly in several places in the book. When you reach those places, slow down. The line is the place where care lives.

And finally

What you have in your hands is the result of many hours of writing, calibrating, choosing, cutting. It is also the result of the days you yourself spent in the work — without your presence in those rooms, this book would not exist in this form. So: thank you for what you brought. We hope this companion accompanies you well.

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« Awareness is not a tool you apply to the work. It is the ground the work stands on. »

I N T R O D U C T I O N

What this book is, and what it is not

Origin · context · audience · use

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This book is the written companion to the EMPATHYE training course, held at Casa del Trigo (La Almudema, Murcia, Spain) in 2026 within the framework of an Erasmus+ accreditation project led by YOMN (Now Matters Youth). It gathers the conceptual ground, the practices, and the reflections that ran through the two residential weeks of the programme, in a form that participants can return to over the years that follow.

Where it comes from

EMPATHYE was designed for youth workers, trainers, educators and psychotherapists working in non-formal education contexts across Europe. The participant group of the 2026 cohort came from eleven countries: Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, Ukraine, Portugal, Estonia, Denmark, Lithuania, Czech Republic. Each country brought its own traditions of working with young people, its own ways of holding emotional life in professional practice, its own vocabularies for what we share. The book is shaped by all of them.

The training itself was built on years of practice — Diego's work in Gestalt therapy and group facilitation, Laura's work in clinical psychology and supervision, the cumulative experience of running residential trainings for youth workers across the continent. None of what is written here is theoretical in the abstract sense. Everything in this book has been tested in rooms full of practitioners, refined when it did not work, kept when it did.

Who it is for

Two readers, primarily, with a small overlap.

YOUTH WORKERS · TRAINERS · EDUCATORS

Those who work with young people in non-formal education — residentials, workshops, youth centres, schools, community

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS · CLINICIANS

Those who practise within a clinical or therapeutic frame. The book does not replace clinical training, supervision, or your own ongoing work. It offers

projects. The book offers a vocabulary for what is happening in the room, beyond the activity plan, and a discipline for sharpening your own presence as the primary instrument of your work.

a particular synthesis — Gestalt, theatre, the European tradition, the work with character — that may complement what you already carry.

The overlap is real but small. Most readers will recognise themselves clearly in one column or the other. A few will move between them, and a few will be in transition from one to the other. The book speaks to all three.

What it is not

It is not a manual. It does not give you steps to follow with young people, nor scripts to repeat in sessions. The work this book describes is not the kind that can be reduced to recipes. If you read it expecting to find a kit, you will be disappointed.

It is not a substitute for the lived training. The chapters reactivate what was lived during the residential weeks for those who were there; they introduce the territory for those who were not. But reading is not the same as being in the room with eighteen other practitioners working on themselves. If this book is your first encounter with this material, treat it as a doorway, not a destination.

It is not the last word. The synthesis offered here is one synthesis, made by two specific people in a specific moment of their practice. Other syntheses exist. We have tried to point to them where relevant. Read with us, but also read against us.

How to read it

Cover to cover, if that is how you like to read. Or by parts, if you prefer to enter through what is calling you most right now. Or backwards, starting with the resources and working your way into the foundations. There is no wrong order, although there is a logic to the sequence we have chosen — earlier parts establish vocabulary that later parts use.

The book is also written so that you can return to it. Different sections will speak to you at different moments. Mark what feels alive. Skip what does not. Come back when something in your practice points you back here.

On caring for yourself as you do this work

One last thing before you turn the page. The work this booklet describes asks a lot of the person who facilitates it. It assumes presence, awareness, the ability to hold discomfort without rushing to fix it, and a willingness to be moved by what is in front of you. None of that is sustainable on its own.

If you are using this material in your professional life, please do not treat the facilitator as someone who simply « holds » everything. You are not a vessel. You are a person, with your own history, your own fixations, your own days when you have less to give. The work shown in these pages is only safe to do — for you and for the people you accompany — when it is supported by structures outside this book: your own ongoing therapy or personal process, regular supervision, a co-facilitator or peer with whom you can speak honestly, and time off the stage to recover.

When you notice you are running on empty, the most professional thing you can do is not to push through. It is to step back, ask for help, or let someone else hold the room. Burnout in this work does not look like exhaustion alone; it often looks like cynicism, distance, or a quiet loss of care. If you start to feel any of those, treat it as a signal, not as a failure.

This book invites you to be present with others. The invitation makes no sense if it does not also include being present with yourself.

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« You are joining a wider conversation. »

PART

I

Foundations

The ground we walk on · attitude, theory, daily practice

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PART I · CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What this training exists for, and where it comes from

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This chapter is the first of the theoretical frame. Before you can use anything in this book — the maps of character, the systems of belonging, the deep work, the practical applications — you need to know what kind of work you have in your hands, what tradition it comes from, and why anyone bothered building it in the first place.

What follows is not exhaustive. It is the minimum vocabulary you need to read the rest of the book without confusion. The fuller treatment is in the chapters that come.

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1.1. Why Empathye? The real purpose and needs in youth work

— A PERSONAL NOTE FROM DIEGO

I've been accompanying youth workers across Europe for years now, and there's something I see again and again: we get trained in methodologies, facilitation techniques, project management… but nobody teaches us how to be present. Nobody prepares us to hold what really happens when you sit in front of a group of young people carrying anxiety, anger, confusion, or simply the weight of growing up in an increasingly complex world.

The Empathye training was born from a very simple insight: in youth work, the most powerful tool is not a method — it's you. Your capacity to be there, to not leave when things get difficult, to recognise what you're feeling without being swept away by it, to create a space where others can be authentic because you are too.

Gestalt therapy gave me something no pedagogical training ever had: a way to work from awareness, not from control. And what I've learned over these years is that when youth workers develop this conscious presence, everything changes. Not because they apply new techniques, but because they themselves become a safe space.

The most powerful tool in youth work is not a method. It is you.

That is why Empathye is not just another course about “group dynamics” or “conflict resolution.” It is an invitation to a process of personal transformation that has direct effects on your professional practice.

We are not going to teach you what to do with young people. We are going to accompany you so you discover how to be with them in a more real, more alive, more human way.

1.2. Where Gestalt comes from: Fritz, Laura, and the path to Europe

Gestalt therapy was born in the 1940s through the work of Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman. But more than a therapeutic technique, Gestalt was from the beginning a way of living — an invitation to awareness, spontaneity, and authentic contact with what is.

From the start, there were two very different sensibilities at the root of the work. Both were necessary. Neither alone is the whole.

Fritz Perls	Laura Perls
A provocative, theatrical, intense man. In his famous “hot seat” experiments, he invited people to exaggerate movements, dialogue with their inner voices, dramatise conflicts. For him, real change began when you dared to face the truth of your present experience, without rationalisations.	A much more relational, subtler gaze. Influenced by phenomenology and Martin Buber's I-Thou philosophy, she saw therapy as an encounter between two people, where transformation happens in the space of mutual presence, not in dramatic confrontation.

Both gazes still live in Gestalt today, and you will recognise both inside this booklet. The intensity of the work on character, the courage of the feared scene, the embodied theatre — that is Fritz. The mutual therapies, the attention to the field between two people, the I-Thou frame — that is Laura. Empathye chose, deliberately, not to pick one over the other.

From its American origins, Gestalt travelled. In the 1960s and 1970s it crossed into Europe and met very different soil than California. The Germans took it toward phenomenology and existential ethics. The French wove it with humanism, art, and culture. The Italians and Spanish carried it into community work, social education, schools. By the 1990s and 2000s, a distinctly European sensibility had formed — less hot-seat, more dialogue; less catharsis, more field; less personal breakthrough, more shared awareness.

Empathye sits inside that European tradition. We work with intensity when intensity is what the moment asks for. But we are not trying to replicate the California of the seventies. We are trying to do something specifically European: presence as a quiet form of civic education.

About the Gestalt Prayer — a misunderstood text

Most people who have heard of Gestalt have heard of the Gestalt Prayer. “I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations…” Fritz wrote it in the late 1960s, and within a few years it had been printed on posters, t-shirts, and the inside of countless American refrigerators.

It has aged badly. Read at face value today, it sounds like an anthem for narcissistic withdrawal — the theme song of someone who refuses connection in the name of authenticity. That is not what Fritz meant, but it is how the text often lands now.

The deeper teaching underneath the prayer is closer to this: you cannot meet another person genuinely if you are distorting yourself to satisfy them. The prayer is a defence against the kind of compliance that masquerades as care — the helper who has lost themselves so thoroughly that there is no real “them” left for the other to meet. Read with that frame, the prayer is not about isolation. It is about the precondition for real contact.

We mention this because the prayer often comes up as a caricature of Gestalt. Inside Empathye, the prayer is neither the centre nor the door. It is a historical artefact, useful to know about, easy to misread. The work itself — what you will find in the rest of this book — is the opposite of withdrawal.

1.3. Why this matters for Empathye

Three reasons specifically. None of them are abstract.

First, because youth workers are exhausted. Not lazy, not unprofessional, not undertrained — exhausted. The combination of emotional labour, structural underfunding, and the constant pull to be “more” for young people who keep arriving with heavier baggage has produced a generation of helpers who are burning out before their fortieth birthday. Gestalt offers something direct here: a way of being present that draws on the worker's awareness rather than depleting their performance. It does not solve the structural problem. It changes the terms on which the worker meets it.

Second, because young people in Europe today are growing up in conditions that no previous generation had to navigate at this scale. Anxiety as baseline. Identity as something to be defended in real time on screens. The pressures of climate uncertainty, economic precarity, and political polarisation pressing down on bodies that have not yet finished forming. The standard youth-work toolkit — activities, agendas, group dynamics — was built for an earlier century. It is no longer enough on its own. Gestalt does not replace those tools. It places them inside a deeper frame, one that takes the inner life of both worker and young person seriously.

Third, because the European Training Strategy itself — the framework against which youth-work professional development is read across the continent — places personal and interpersonal competence at the centre of what a youth worker is. Awareness of values and emotions, capacity to communicate authentically, ability to manage ambiguity and diversity, responsible action within community. Gestalt is not the only path to those competences. But it is one of the most direct, because it does not just describe them — it cultivates them through lived experience.

If any of those three reasons sounds like the situation you are in, the rest of this book is for you.

1.4. For youth workers: why this training exists

We want to close this opening chapter with something specific to those of you who are not psychotherapists — the youth workers, educators, facilitators, trainers and project leaders who carry the daily weight of being there for young people without the formal clinical container that therapists have.

This training does not turn you into a therapist. It is important to say that clearly, near the start. There is a line between holding a fertile space where a young person can encounter themselves, and conducting therapeutic work that requires clinical training, supervision, and a contained therapeutic frame. Knowing where that line is — and holding it with respect — is part of the work.

What this training does instead is something subtler and, in our view, more useful for what you actually do. It deepens your capacity to be present. It gives you a vocabulary for what is happening in the room — in the young person, in the group, and in you — so that you can choose your responses instead of reacting from old patterns. It builds the inner ground from which all your other skills get applied.

When you have walked through this work, you will not necessarily do different activities with your young people. You may do the exact same activities. But the way you arrive in the room, the way you listen during a conflict, the way you hold silence, the way you notice what is happening in your own body when a participant pushes against your authority — all of that will be different. And the young people will feel the difference, even if they could not name it.

That is what we are offering. Not a new method. A different kind of practitioner.

> ▶ **Self-observation**
>
> *Think about the last difficult moment you had in your professional practice with a young person. Not a catastrophe — a small one, an ordinary one. A moment where you reacted in a way that surprised you, or that felt automatic, or that left a faint after-taste. Hold that moment in your mind. The chapters that follow are written for that moment. Not to give you a tool that would have fixed it, but to help you see, the next time it happens, what was actually going on inside you.*

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What follows in this book is not a curriculum. It is a way of practising. The difference matters.

2

Theoretical Foundations

The ground concepts of Gestalt, lived from the inside

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« Gestalt is not something you understand intellectually and then apply. It is something you live. »

The concepts that follow only make sense when you feel them in your body, when you notice them happening in your relationships, when you catch yourself doing exactly what the theory describes. So yes, we will explain the foundations. But please do not just read them — watch for them in your own experience as you read.

What follows is not a textbook in miniature. It is a map of the ideas you have already touched during the programme, written in a way that lets you return to them when the body memory begins to fade.

2.1 Core principles of Gestalt

Here and now · awareness · contact · responsibility

Gestalt is often summarised in a few keywords: here and now, awareness, contact, responsibility. These words sound simple, but each one carries a depth that has to be lived to be understood. Read them once for the idea. Then watch them appear in your week.

Here and now

Life happens only in the present moment. Not in your memory of what happened yesterday, not in your fantasy about what might happen tomorrow — but right now, in this room, with this breath, with these particular bodies in this particular silence.

In youth work, you are constantly pulled between planning the next activity and processing what went wrong in the last one. But what about what is happening now? The young person sitting in front of you with their arms crossed. The tension you feel in your shoulders. The silence in the room that nobody is naming.

Returning to the here and now is not a technique. It is an act of courage. It means letting go of control long enough to actually see what is in front of you. Most of what we call *“facilitation”* is in fact escape from the present moment, dressed up as professionalism.

Awareness

Awareness is not just thinking about something. It is noticing what is alive in you right now: sensations in your body, emotions moving through you, impulses you are holding back, needs you are ignoring.

In Gestalt, awareness is both the method and the goal. Change does not happen by forcing yourself to be different. It happens by becoming conscious of what you are actually doing. The youth worker who tells themselves “I need to be more patient” while their whole body is screaming with tension is fighting the wrong battle. The Gestalt question is not “How can I be more patient?” but “What am I experiencing right now that makes patience so hard?”

When you bring awareness to what is, something shifts. Not because you have applied a technique, but because consciousness itself is transformative. This is one of the oldest insights in our field, and one of the easiest to forget under pressure.

Contact

Human beings grow through authentic connection. In Gestalt, contact is not the same as communication or even relationship — it is the moment of meeting where two people are genuinely affected by each other. Something passes through. The boundary between you becomes permeable, and then re-forms.

Most of what passes for connection in groups is in fact something else: politeness, performance, a careful management of distance. Real contact is rarer than we admit, and more demanding. It asks you to be there as you are, not as you wish you were.

Responsibility

Gestalt uses this word in a very specific way. Responsibility here does not mean obligation, blame, or duty. It means literally the ability to respond —

to recognise what is yours, to own what is moving in you, to act from a place of contact rather than reaction.

When you take responsibility in this Gestalt sense, you stop saying *"the group made me feel anxious"* and start asking *"what is the anxiety in me trying to tell me about what is happening here?"* The first sentence makes you a victim. The second one makes you a practitioner.

2.2 The cycle of need

How experience completes itself, and how it gets stuck

Every need follows a natural cycle. Something appears at the edge of awareness — a sensation, a hunger, a discomfort, a curiosity. If the cycle is allowed to unfold, the need rises into clear awareness, mobilises energy, moves toward action, makes contact with what satisfies it, and then completes — releasing into satisfaction and rest. A new cycle begins.

When the cycle is interrupted at any of its stages, something gets stuck. The energy that was building has nowhere to go. It does not disappear; it goes underground, where it shapes mood, posture, and behaviour without your knowing it. This is the territory of unfinished business — the conversations you did not have, the no you did not say, the grief you did not let yourself feel.

The seven stages, briefly

- **Sensation** — something registers in the body, often before the mind has named it.
- **Awareness** — the sensation comes into focus. You begin to know what you are feeling.
- **Mobilisation** — energy gathers. Something in you starts orienting toward what is needed.
- **Action** — you move. You speak, you reach out, you turn away, you ask, you go.
- **Contact** — encounter with what satisfies. The need meets its object.
- **Satisfaction** — the need completes. There is fullness, release.
- **Withdrawal** — you let go. Rest. Space opens for the next cycle to begin.

In youth work, the cycle is everywhere once you start to look for it. The young person who can never finish a conversation — they get stuck before contact. The participant who cannot rest after a difficult session — they

cannot complete the withdrawal. The colleague who is constantly mobilised but never acts — energy without movement. Each interruption is a clue.

Your work is not to force the cycle. It is to notice where it gets stuck, in yourself first, and then in the people you accompany. What you cannot complete in your own cycles, you will be unable to recognise in theirs.

2.3 Polarities

The art of holding opposites

Inside every human being there are opposing forces. Strength and vulnerability. Independence and the need to belong. The wish to speak and the wish to disappear. The pull toward the new and the loyalty to the old. These are not contradictions to be resolved. They are the structure of being alive.

The mistake we make, again and again, is to identify with one pole and disown the other. We say “I am a calm person” and exile our anger. We say “I am independent” and bury our need. The disowned pole does not vanish — it goes into the shadow, where it surfaces in moments we cannot control: the burst of rage from the calm one, the desperate clinging from the independent one.

« Health is not the absence of one pole. It is the capacity to hold both. »

Gestalt invites you to recognise the pole you have made invisible — and to learn to inhabit it without shame. This does not mean acting it out. It means letting it have a voice in the inner conversation. The angry calm person becomes a person who can be calm and angry, who can choose. The independent one becomes someone who can stand alone and reach for help, who has options.

In the room with young people

The young people you work with are often caught in a polarity they do not yet know is theirs. They identify hard with one side — rebellion, perfection, toughness, sensitivity — and reject the other. Your task is not to push them toward the missing pole. It is to make room for it to appear, when it is ready.

Sometimes that means refusing to take sides in their internal civil war. The young person who rages against their family also longs for them; the one who performs constant strength is also exhausted. If you only mirror one side, you become a mirror of their split. If you can hold both with calm, you become evidence that both can live in the same room.

In Europe, in our work

European youth work, at its best, is a polarity practice on a continental scale. Be independent, yet connected. Be assertive, yet tolerant. Be digital, yet human. Be local, yet European. These are not slogans — they are the lived contradictions the young people in your projects are trying to metabolise.

The European Training Strategy names what you already know: that personal and interpersonal competence — the capacity to hold ambiguity, to communicate authentically, to act responsibly within complexity — is the heart of this work. Gestalt offers a process for cultivating exactly that competence. Not through manuals. Through lived experience of holding opposites without collapsing into one.

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Sections 2.4 to 2.6 follow.

2.4 Neurotic mechanisms

How you interrupt contact, and why

When the cycle of need cannot complete itself — because the environment did not allow it, because the moment was unsafe, because nobody was there to receive what you were trying to express — the organism does something intelligent. It learns to interrupt the cycle before it gets to the painful place. It develops a defence.

These defences are not pathology. They are creative adjustments. They were appropriate, even necessary, at some point in your life. The problem is that they tend to outlive the situation that produced them. The protection that saved you at six is still running at thirty-six, and now it is the thing that prevents contact instead of preserving it.

Gestalt names seven of these mechanisms. You will recognise yourself in several of them. That is not a diagnosis. It is a map. The work is not to eliminate them — they will always be available to you when you need them — but to recognise them in real time, so you stop being run by them in situations where they no longer serve.

1. Desensitisation

Disconnecting from your own body sensations so that needs cannot enter awareness. You stop feeling tiredness, hunger, pain, desire. The signals are still there; you have learned not to read them.

In the room: *you finish a long session and only realise hours later that your back is in spasm, your throat is raw, you have not eaten.*

2. Deflection

Diverting attention away from direct contact to avoid emotional exposure. Humour at the wrong moment, abstract analysis, changing the subject, looking away. Anything that breaks the encounter just before it gets real.

In the room: *a young person says something vulnerable, and you respond with a joke or a piece of advice instead of staying with what they offered.*

3. Introjection

Swallowing external rules, beliefs, or values without chewing them. You absorb what you were told without ever asking whether it is true for you. The voice of others becomes the voice in your head, and you stop being able to tell them apart.

In the room: *you find yourself saying things you do not actually believe, in the exact words your father, your teacher, or your previous boss used.*

4. Projection

Attributing your own feelings, impulses, or qualities to other people, so you do not have to own them. The anger you cannot feel becomes the anger you see everywhere. The need you cannot admit becomes the neediness of the other.

In the room: *you are convinced that the participant is angry with you, when in fact you are angry with them and you cannot let yourself know it.*

5. Retroflection

Turning energy inward instead of expressing it toward the environment. What was meant to go out comes back at you. The impulse to say no becomes a tightening in your jaw. The need to be touched becomes a posture of self-holding.

In the room: *you wanted to say something difficult to a colleague; instead you go home with a headache and ruminate about it for three days.*

6. Egotism

Excessive self-observation that prevents surrender to the experience. You watch yourself instead of being yourself. You are so busy monitoring how it is going that you cannot let it actually happen.

In the room: *you cannot enjoy a moment with the group because half of you is watching the moment and judging your performance in it.*

7. Confluence

Disappearing into the other or into the group, losing the boundary between self and environment. You feel what they feel, want what they want, lose track of what is actually yours. There is connection but no contact, because there is no longer a you to make contact from.

In the room: *after three days with a group you cannot remember what you yourself think, only what the group thinks.*

These mechanisms come up in pairs and clusters. A confluent youth worker often carries strong projection. A retroflective one often deflects with

humour. Once you start to look, you will see the patterns, in yourself and in the people you accompany.

The work is not to *fix* these patterns. The work is to *recognise* them — and to learn the small, body-level signal that tells you the mechanism has just kicked in. That signal is your gateway back. The mechanism runs in the dark; awareness brings it into the light, where it loses some of its automatism.

2.5 The body in Gestalt

Your wisest teacher

Here is something I have learned over years of practice: the body does not lie.

Your mind can rationalise, deny, explain away. It can construct entire narratives about why what is happening is not really happening. Your body cannot. The body tells the truth, even when the rest of you is committed to a different story.

- That tightness in your chest when someone challenges you.
- The way your shoulders rise when you are trying to control something.
- The softness that arrives when you finally feel safe.

Gestalt sees the body not as separate from the mind but as inseparable from it. Emotions and needs are expressed through posture, breath, gesture, the held-back impulse and the unfinished movement. When words fail — and they often do, especially in the territory where this work happens — the body speaks.

In the therapy room

We might invite someone to exaggerate a small movement, to find out what wants to happen if they let it. To give voice to a body part: “If your clenched fist could speak, what would it say?” To slow down a gesture until they can feel what is in it. These are not theatrical exercises. They are ways of letting the body finish a sentence the mind kept interrupting.

In youth work

You will rarely do those exact exercises with a group of young people, and you should not try to. But the same attention is available to you. A young person sitting with arms tightly crossed. Someone who will not make eye

contact. The participant who is always fidgeting. These are not problems to fix. They are messages to receive.

Sometimes all it takes is a single sentence said gently: “I notice you are sitting very still right now. What are you aware of in your body?” You do not need to know what to do with the answer. Asking the question is already the work. You are inviting the body into the room as a participant.

Two ways of working with the body

Within Gestalt itself, there are different sensibilities about how to bring the body into the work. The Naranjo lineage and the European schools approach this differently. Both are valid; both have something to teach you. You will find your own balance over time.

Naranjo lineage	European schools
Direct, expressive, sometimes provocative. Movement, sound, theatre, exaggeration. The body is invited to act out what the mind has hidden, in a contained ritual space.	*Subtle, dialogical, descriptive. Naming what is observed, inviting awareness without prescribing what to do with it. The body is followed, not directed.*
Closer to ritual and somatic catharsis. Trusts the wisdom of intensified expression to release what was held.	*Closer to phenomenology and quiet contact. Trusts the wisdom of patient attention to reveal what is already happening.*

In youth work contexts you will rely much more on the European mode. It fits the role, the time available, the level of contract you have with participants. But knowing the Naranjo approach exists changes how you read the body in the room. It reminds you that the body always has more to say than the words allow.

2.6 A brief note on mindfulness

What it shares with Gestalt, and where it differs

Mindfulness has become a common reference in European education, social work, and youth contexts over the last two decades. You may already use mindfulness practices in your work. Some of what follows in this

booklet will sound familiar, because Gestalt and mindfulness share an ancestor: the cultivation of awareness as a transformative practice.

But they are not the same thing, and it is worth being clear about the difference before you go further.

What they share

Both ask you to come back to the present moment. Both treat awareness itself as the instrument of change. Both refuse to pathologise difficult emotions, choosing instead to make space for them. Both honour the body as a primary source of information.

Where they differ

Mindfulness, in most of its modern Western forms, emphasises witnessing what arises without reacting to it. The instruction is to observe, label, and let pass. The frame is one of equanimity — staying with what is, without grasping or pushing away.

Gestalt is more interventionist. It does not just witness; it experiments. It asks you to stay with the sensation, yes, but also to follow where it wants to go, to give it expression, to complete the gesture or the sentence that was interrupted. Where mindfulness watches the wave rise and fall, Gestalt sometimes asks: what would this wave do if it were not held back?

The two approaches are complementary, not competing. Mindfulness teaches you to *stay*. Gestalt teaches you to *stay and then let something move*. In your daily practice, you will probably find yourself drawing on both, depending on what the moment asks for.

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« Awareness is not a tool you apply to the work. »

« It is the ground the work stands on. »

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End of chapter 2. The handouts of Part I follow.

The Attitude of Service

In the therapeutic and facilitative encounter

The group as a mirror of my blind spots

Feedback circle « what brings me closer / what takes me further »

Theoretical notes for participants

◆ ◆ ◆

1. Why we need the other

The blind spot of character

In the previous notes — Character as Lifejacket and as Prison — we described a central paradox of the work we are doing this week. The mental fixation, that automatic thought which organises the way we look at the world, is the lens, not the object. Precisely because we are looking through it, we cannot see it. Like the fish that does not see the water, each of us lives inside a character structure that has become transparent through use.

This poses a serious technical problem for anyone wanting to work on themselves: you cannot correct what you cannot see. And you cannot see what you are looking with. No matter how much introspection you do, no matter how many hours of individual therapy you accumulate, there are zones of your character that will remain invisible to you as long as you remain the only observer.

The way out of this paradox is not more introspection. The way out is another. Another body, another gaze, another perception that is not trapped inside your own structure. The other sees what you cannot see because they are looking from outside the system. And when that other is multiplied by nineteen — when an entire group reflects back to you what they perceive of you — the effect is qualitatively different: a map of your blind spots appears, one that no individual process could ever have produced.

This document

These notes accompany the « close / far » feedback circle that we are doing this morning. They are, in part, a preparation for what is about to happen in the room; and in part, a frame for accompanying what comes afterwards in each of your professional lives.

> ***A note on scope and level.*** The dispositive described in these notes — the « close / far » feedback circle — is designed for the participants of this programme: facilitators, trainers, and psychotherapists with prior training and a holding context. It is not, as it stands, directly transferable to general youth work, school groups, or any setting that does not have an equivalent frame of psychological safety, group maturity, and experienced facilitation. If you want to bring something of this spirit into those settings, work with the lighter group practices in chapter 3 of Part V (« reading the body of the group », naming what is in the room) rather than transposing the full circle. The circle itself is not for beginners, and that is not a hierarchy of who is allowed to do the work — it is a question of what conditions make the work safe for the person who receives the feedback.

The document is organised around three axes. First, what we mean by the attitude of service in this context, and how it differs from people-pleasing, judgement, and advice-giving. Second, how this attitude embodies itself when I give feedback and when I receive it. Third, how to use what the group has reflected back to me as living material for my own work, both here and in my daily professional practice.

« The other is not an obstacle to my self-knowledge. The other is the instrument without which my self-knowledge cannot complete itself. »

2. What we mean by the attitude of service

It is not people-pleasing

To serve is not to please. When someone confuses service with pleasing, what they produce is not care but flattery — and flattery, even when it disguises itself as kindness, has a bitter taste, because the person who receives it senses, even without being able to name it, that what is being

given back is not themselves but a softened, marketable version of themselves.

People-pleasing is built from fear: fear of losing the other's affection, fear of being excluded, fear of the discomfort of conflict. The pleaser says what they think the other wants to hear. And in that movement they betray not only the truth of their own perception; they betray the other too, because they deprive them of the only gift this circle can offer — an honest gaze from outside.

It is not diagnosis or judgement

To serve is also not to judge. When we give feedback from a place of judgement — “you are like this”, “you do that thing”, “your problem is that…” — we are placing ourselves above the other and pretending to know more about them than they know themselves. This produces closure, not opening. The person who receives a judgement defends themselves, retreats, or sinks. None of these three responses is the purpose of the circle.

The difference between judgement and service is precise. Judgement says: “you are intrusive.” Service says: “when you come closer physically, I tense up and pull back; that is what takes me further from you.” The first claims to be absolute truth; the second is the honest testimony of an experience. Both can carry valuable information, but only the second can be received without automatically activating the other's defences.

A specific internal positioning

So what is the attitude of service? It is a way of being present that is organised around three simultaneous orientations:

- **Serve the person, not my own agenda.** When I speak, what I am looking for is to offer something useful to the one in the centre, not to discharge my discomfort, not to display my intelligence, not to settle a score with someone else in the group. The internal question is simple: does what I am about to say serve the person who is going to receive it?
- **Serve the group's process, not the relief of my own discomfort.** When there are silences, tensions, difficult moments, my impulse may be to soften, interrupt, rescue. To serve the process means holding the discomfort for as long as needed for something to emerge, even if it costs me. The group's process does not need my calm; it needs my presence.

- **Serve what is true, not what is comfortable.** What brings closest and what takes furthest is, almost always, what no one dares to name. True service says the difficult thing in the most careful form possible — but says it. The comfortable, sweetened, generic version ("I like you, you are contributing a lot") serves no one.

This triple orientation defines the internal positioning from which we work today. It is not an emotional state — you do not need to feel inspired or serenely spiritual in order to serve. It is a choice each one makes upon entering the room: I am going to try to make my presence here serve what is happening, rather than have what is happening serve my mood.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Think of a recent professional situation in which you gave feedback to someone — a colleague, a participant, a supervisee. Were you more in pleasing mode, in judgement mode, or in service mode? What bodily clues tell you which of the three you were in?*

3. The dispositive

The « close / far » feedback circle

The instruction

The dispositive is deliberately simple. One by one, each participant places themselves in the centre of the circle. The others, from their seats, will tell that person what brings them closer to them and what takes them further from them. The person in the centre receives. They do not respond, do not justify, do not explain, do not correct. They only listen. When the group has spoken, the person stands, returns to their chair, and another takes their place.

Two facilitators hold the circle — Diego in one group, Laura in another — because twenty people in a single circle would be too many. The format of two parallel sub-groups allows each person to receive enough without the day stretching to exhaustion.

Why « close / far » and not « good / bad »

The instruction is not "tell them what you like and dislike about them." Nor is it "point out their virtues and their faults." The instruction is precise: what brings me closer to you, what takes me further from you. This

formulation is not cosmetic. It completely changes the nature of what is said.

« Close / far » describes an internal movement of the one who speaks, not a judgement on the one who listens. No one has the authority to declare whether another is good or bad, whether they do things well or poorly. Everyone, however, can give honest testimony of what the other does that, in their experience, opens contact and what closes it. That testimony is precious information precisely because it does not pretend to be more than it is.

There is an additional advantage: what takes me further may not take another further. What brings me closer may leave another indifferent. That is why the circle works only when the whole group speaks: it is not about hearing one voice and taking it as truth, but about hearing many voices and observing what patterns emerge. If only one person says your way of speaking puts them at a distance, that is an individual reaction. If seven people say it with different words, that is a map.

The body as first source

When you listen to a person in the group, before mentally formulating what you are going to say to them, bring your attention to your body. What happens in you when this person speaks? Do your shoulders relax or tense? Does your torso lean forward or pull back? Does your breathing open or contain itself?

The body registers the « close / far » movement before the mind does. If you start from analysis (“I think this person is…”) you will construct an elaborate but probably false response: you will say what you think you should say. If you start from the body (“when you speak I tense / I open / I stay”), you access information that is more precise and more useful. Words come afterwards, to put a name on what the body has already perceived.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Over the next few days, in any interaction, try to register the bodily sensation first and only afterwards think in words. What do you discover? What appears that you were not seeing before?*

The chair in the centre

Being in the centre is not being in the dock. The centre is not a tribunal. The one who places themselves in the centre occupies a specific position:

that of someone who has decided, for a few minutes, to be seen. This decision, which seems simple, is one of the most demanding acts of the week. Because to be seen also means to be seen in what we do not want others to see.

The person in the centre does not have to demonstrate anything. They do not have to show themselves strong, or open, or grateful. They only have to be — with the body as present as possible, breathing, holding the gaze of whoever speaks to them when they can, lowering their eyes when they cannot. The only commitment is not to flee — neither physically, nor with the mind into a future where this is already over, nor with an internal narrative that minimises what is being received.

4. Giving feedback as an act of service

Speaking from me, not about you

The first technical rule of service when I speak is the « I ». Everything I say should be expressible as an observation about my own experience: I feel, I notice, I come closer, I move further away. This is not a rhetorical formula; it is a discipline. When I say “you are dominant”, I am making an assertion about the other that I have no way of verifying. When I say “when you take the floor for a long time, I disconnect”, I am giving precise and verifiable information, because I am the only one who can know my own internal experience.

This distinction — “you are” versus “I feel when you…” — is the difference between placing the other as the object of my judgement and placing myself as the witness of my experience. The first closes; the second opens.

Describing, not interpreting

When you speak, try to describe observable behaviours, not to attribute intentions or causes. “When you interrupt to finish another person's sentences, I get tense” is a description of a concrete behaviour and of my internal reaction. “You do it because you need to control the situation” is an interpretation — a theory of mine about the other's hidden motives, which is probably partial and which, in any case, is not yours to formulate.

Interpretation is always cheaper than description. It is easier to say “you are insecure” than to describe the concrete gestures from which someone might draw that impression. But cheap, in this context, does not serve. What serves is descriptive, because the descriptive is the only thing the other can take and work with. Nobody can do anything with “you are insecure”; many people can do something with “when you speak, your

voice gets quieter in the last third of each sentence, and I lose part of the content."

The body before the word

It has already been mentioned: before speaking, register the body. This rule deserves to be stated again because it determines the quality of everything that follows. The body is, for the facilitator and for the therapist, the most honest instrument. If your body closes when someone speaks, that information is worth more than any sophisticated analysis of why it should close. Describe it. Offer it.

A practical example: "What takes me further from you: when you enter a topic that seems important to you, I notice your rhythm accelerates, and my body starts to close — I lean back, I hold my breath. I don't know if it's your rhythm that does it to me, but I wanted to tell you. What brings me closer: when you spoke yesterday about your brother, your voice dropped in volume and I leaned forward without realising." This is pure description, in first person, with the body. There is no judgement. And yet it contains immensely valuable information for the person in the centre.

What I should not do

There are five classical temptations that erode the quality of feedback. It is worth recognising them in order to resist them:

- **Giving advice.** "What you should do is…", "If I were you…", "You'd be better off if…" This is not what the person in the centre needs. They come to receive a mirror, not a manual. Your advice, however well-intentioned, returns the axis to the speaker — I know — when it should remain with the listener.
- **Comparing with my own experience.** "Something similar happened to me when…" This is one of the most subtle forms of shifting the focus. It looks like empathy, but it is displacement. The person in the centre stops being the subject and I take over to tell my own story. There is a place for that — outside this circle.
- **Interpreting causes.** "This surely comes from your family", "You do this because deep down…" You don't know why the other does what they do. Nor is it your place to formulate hypotheses about their biography. That investigation is theirs, not yours.
- **Softening until you say nothing.** "You bring me so close, you are a wonderful person." A response this generic serves no one. If you feel you have to soften to this extent, there is probably something more precise and more honest you are choosing not to say. Look for that more honest thing. Say it with care, but say it.

- **Exaggerating to make myself noticed.** The reverse of the above. Sometimes the pressure of the circle pushes you to say something very strong in order to “rise to the occasion”. If what you say is not proportional to what you really feel, you erode the group's trust in the dispositive. The right measure is the real measure of your experience, neither more nor less.

The right dose

A response that is too long dilutes itself; one that is too short stays on the surface. The right measure is usually between one and three sentences, offered with a pause, giving the person in the centre time to receive without rushing. It is better to say one thing precisely than five things superficially.

If you feel you have nothing to contribute, it is also a legitimate option not to speak in that round. The silence of someone who has nothing to say is more respectful than an obligatory filler.

Saying also what brings closer

A detail worth taking care of: the circle is called « close / far », not « far ». Many groups, when they reach this dynamic, have a more developed critical muscle than nourishing muscle. But saying what brings me closer is just as important, and often more difficult. It is more difficult because it requires precision about appreciation — not “I like you a lot”, but “when you listen, I notice you slow down your rhythm and that opens me up.” And it is more important because many people have no idea what their most valuable resource is. They know what doesn't work in them, but they don't know what does. Telling them what brings me closer to them is, literally, giving them new information about their own territory that they had not yet mapped.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Before entering the circle, think of one or two people in the group in whom you perceive a resource they themselves perhaps do not see. Can you formulate that resource with precision, without falling into generic praise?*

5. Receiving feedback as service to oneself

The position of the centre: receiving without responding

The instruction for the one in the centre is counter-intuitive: do not respond. Do not justify yourself, do not correct, do not explain the contexts, do not clarify what you meant at such-and-such moment. This rule seems harsh and is, probably, the most important of the dispositive.

The reason is technical. If you respond, you automatically enter your habitual character — the one who comes to explain, to defend, to nuance. And that character is exactly the one the group is trying to reflect back to you. The only way to see it from outside is not to let it come out. While it is silent, you can listen. The moment it takes the floor, listening closes.

Furthermore, each piece of feedback you receive needs time to settle. If you respond hot, you react to the sound of the words, not to their meaning. If you keep silent, the words enter and stay — some resonate immediately, others will resonate within an hour, a day, a week. Receptivity is a state that response interrupts.

The receiving body

Receiving is not only not speaking. It is also a bodily posture. If you close yourself physically — arms crossed, jaw tight, breath held — words bounce off your surface. If you keep your body reasonably open — shoulders not loaded, breath visible, feet on the ground — words enter.

It is not about adopting a perfect meditation posture. It is about registering, while you receive, what happens in your body. When someone says something that hurts me, what part of me contracts? The stomach, the chest, the throat? When someone says something that lands as nourishment, where does the body open? This observation during reception is already, in itself, work — and very valuable material for the rest of the day's sessions.

Separating the data from the wound

Some feedback will hurt. This is normal and is part of the dispositive. What matters is that the pain does not erase the data. When you receive something that wounds you, there is an almost automatic temptation to do one of two things: either reject the content (“that is not true, they are wrong”) or be levelled by it (“they are right, I am awful”). Both reactions are defences, even though they look opposite.

The useful position is a third: hold the pain and keep the data. Yes, it hurts. Yes, perhaps part of what they are saying is true, even if it hurts to admit. It hurts and it is information. Both things are true at once. The work is not to resolve the pain in the moment — that has its own time — but not to let the pain throw the data into the bin.

Trusting the complete map

It is likely you will receive contradictory feedback. One person will say your intensity brings them closer; another will say it takes them further. One will say your silence nourishes them; another will say it disorients them. This is not a flaw of the dispositive — it is first-rate information.

It is not about counting votes and keeping the majority. It is about recognising that you have different effects on different people, and asking yourself what pattern appears when you look at the whole. What kind of people come closer? What kind move away? How does that correspond with your own map of characters from Day 2? Is there some zone of yourself you now see through the group that you did not see before?

Three internal temptations

While you receive, three internal movements will appear with near certainty. It is worth naming them so you can observe them without being carried away.

- **The temptation to justify.** “But it's just that I did that because…” The mind constructs, almost without your deciding, a defensive narrative. Observe it. Do not obey it. This is not the moment.
- **The temptation to reject what hurts.** “That isn't true, that person doesn't know me well.” Observe. It is possible that person doesn't fully know you, and yet their perception is still data about how you arrive in the world. You can decide later what to do with the information; for now, you only keep it.
- **The temptation to cling to what flatters.** Positive feedback is also information, not a medal. If you keep only the pleasant ones and discard the uncomfortable ones, the circle becomes an exercise in narcissistic reaffirmation and loses its function.

Silence as an active position

Keeping silent in the centre is not passivity. It is an active position: I am here, I am receiving, I am letting the words arrive without filtering them through my need to correct them. This silence does something — it allows the group to speak with more freedom, because they know they will not have to defend what they say; it allows you to listen more deeply, because you are not busy formulating the next sentence; and it allows what is received to begin to settle, instead of bouncing against an immediate response.

At the end of your turn, when the group has spoken, there is no obligation to say anything. A deep breath, a tilt of the head, the gesture of standing up

and returning to your seat — that is enough. If you have something to say, let it be brief and true. If not, silence closes the cycle well.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *During the inter-module, was there any moment when someone close to you tried to give you important feedback and you interrupted, justified or rejected? What would have happened if, in that same situation, you had stayed silent and breathed? What data could you have gathered?*

6. The other as a mirror of my blind spots

Why I cannot see myself alone

Return for a moment to the image of the lens. Your mental fixation is the lens through which you look at reality. That lens determines what you see and what you do not see — including what you see and do not see of yourself. When you look in the inner mirror, the lens is still on. You cannot remove it by turning the gaze inward, because it is precisely with that lens that you are looking.

This is what it means technically to have a blind spot: it is not about something you have not yet thought enough about. It is about something that, given the way your character is structured, is invisible from your position. You could spend fifty years introspecting on that point and it would still be invisible. You need another angle. You need someone who is looking from outside your lens.

The group as a collective awareness device

A single other can see you, but they too may be distorted by their own lens. That is why the group works differently than individual feedback. When twenty people reflect back to you what brings them closer and what takes them further, the individual distortions tend to cancel each other out and the patterns become visible. What three very different people, for very different reasons, describe in similar terms — that probably is a feature of yours that activates regardless of the interlocutor. That is the blind spot becoming visible.

In Gestalt terms, the group functions as an expanded perceptual field. Each participant is a point of observation. Together, they construct a more complete map than any one of them could construct separately. And that map is not, strictly, a map of you; it is a map of how your character unfolds

in encounter with others. But that, for a facilitator or a therapist, is precisely the information you need most.

What the group sees and I do not see

There are things the group sees in you that you cannot see for a very simple reason: you do them all the time. They are your baseline. They are the water in which you swim. The crease that appears on your forehead when someone contradicts you, the way you lower your voice when you speak about something important, the gesture of touching your hair just before saying something that makes you uncomfortable — all of this happens without your registering it, because it is part of the background noise of being you.

For another person, by contrast, these gestures are figure, not ground. They see them because they do not do them. When someone reflects back "when you are about to say something difficult, you touch your hair and I notice it", they are giving you access to a gesture of yours that was operating invisibly. Now, the next time you touch your hair, something in you can ask: what difficult thing am I about to say? That question, which did not exist before, is new internal territory gained.

The double gift

The circle reflects back to you two things simultaneously, and both are important although for different reasons.

What takes the group further from you is, frequently, character in action: the harshness of the rigid edge of your fixation, what your defence produces in the other without your realising it. To receive this information with receptivity is to make visible the "wall of the prison" — that part of character which, although invisible to you, keeps others from your contact.

What brings the group closer to you is, frequently, a resource of yours that you were using without appreciating. Something you do naturally and which seems trivial to you — because it has been with you forever — but which nourishes others, opens them, draws them. Knowing these resources is not vanity; it is operational information. Knowing my resources lets me lean on them when I need to, instead of forgetting them under the weight of what I would like to improve.

Neither of these reflections is the whole truth about you. Both are part of the map. It is worth not reducing the work to one direction only — neither obsessing over the sharp edges, nor staying only with the resources and avoiding the edges. The complete map includes both.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Before entering the circle, do the following exercise: write on a piece of paper, without thinking too much, three things you believe bring people closer to you and three things you believe take them further. Keep that paper. At the end of the circle, compare with what the group actually reflected back. Where do they coincide? Where do they differ? The difference is the measure of your blind spot.*

7. After the circle

Not everything fits immediately

When you finish your turn and return to your chair, you will probably have a mixture of sensations difficult to sort. Some feedback will have resonated with force, as if something in you had been waiting to be named. Others will pass without effect — you neither deny nor accept them, they simply say nothing to you for the moment. Others will bother you, will seem unfair, and you will want to refute them mentally.

All of this is expectable. Do not try to organise it immediately. The meaning of much feedback will appear hours or days later, when a concrete situation brings it back to memory and only then will it fit. Some feedback you discard today, you will recognise as true within six months. Other feedback you accept today, you will revisit as incomplete. This process of deferred digestion is part of the normal functioning of the dispositive.

Digesting in the body, not in the head

There is a temptation after the circle: to sit down to analyse the feedback as if it were a report. To make lists, sort, prioritise. This mental strategy, typical of people with rational fixations, usually produces a tidy and flat map that loses the richness of what was received.

A more fertile alternative: give time to the body. Walk. Sleep. Let what you have received circulate in the background while you do other things. Bodily intelligence processes more slowly than the mind, but also more deeply. The feedback that really matters to you will resurface on its own in the coming days — in a dream, in a moment of tiredness, in a conversation with someone outside the group. When it resurfaces, it will already be semi-digested by the body, and only then can you work with it.

What patterns emerge

In the coming days, observe what patterns repeat among what the group has reflected back to you. Some useful questions:

- Is there any word or image that several people, on their own, used to describe me? If three people say “intensity” with different valuations, there is something there.
- Does what takes the group further from me coincide with what my fixation makes me do without realising it? If my fixation is “I must do everything well”, several people probably described some kind of rigidity or demand.
- Is there correspondence between my therapeutic characters (worked on Day 2) and what the group perceives? Is the character I most identify as my own the one the group most sees? Or does the group see above all the character I try to hide?
- Does the pattern that emerges remind me of something in my history? There is no need to resolve the connection; it is enough to register it.

The bridge with the feared scene

This afternoon we will work on the trainer's feared scenes. It is not by accident that this is on the same day as the feedback circle. The scene that most frightens you as a facilitator is, almost always, exactly the scenario where what the group has reflected back to you this morning would appear in public.

If the group has reflected back that your accelerated rhythm puts people at a distance, your feared scene may be the moment when someone asks you to slow down and you become dysregulated. If they have reflected back that your way of controlling closes the space, your feared scene may be the group falling out of control with you not knowing what to do. The feared scene is the theatre in which your fixation fails. And that is why crossing it with presence in the afternoon is one of the most effective ways of working with what was uncovered this morning.

Carrying what was received into professional life

When you return home and to your work, part of what you have received here will continue to operate for weeks. Some practical suggestions so it does not dilute:

- Choose one piece of feedback that struck you and write it in a visible place in your work notebook. Not to obsess over it, but so it reappears at the moment you need it.

- Identify a concrete professional situation in which the feedback might be activated — a meeting with a difficult colleague, a group that costs you, a supervision. When that situation arrives, observe: does the pattern the group reflected back to me appear? How do I notice it in the body?
- If you have a team or a trusted professional network, consider proposing similar exercises — on a smaller scale, and with care that the frame is clear. The feedback muscle is lost if not trained.
- Above all: do not try to apply what you have learned in a forced way. The work done this week will continue operating even if you do nothing with it. Your character has already seen things it did not see before, and that does not undo itself.

8. The grammar of care

This circle, in appearance, is a one-off exercise of one morning. In reality, it is a rehearsal for something more ambitious: the possibility that a community — a team, a network, a working group — might be able to say things to each other. Most institutions where you work lack this grammar. People talk behind each other's backs, productive confrontation is avoided, things are softened to irrelevance, or exploited into resentment. Neither extreme cares. Neither produces development.

What we are trying to embody here is a third way: care as a practice that includes honesty. Not the care that avoids the difficult, but the care that dares to name the difficult because it trusts that the person to whom it is named can hold it. This is the same care you will try to offer to the young people, students, users or patients you work with. You cannot offer them what you yourself have never received.

That is why the circle of this morning is, at the same time, a piece of work on your own character and a technical training for your professional practice. You learn, from inside, how it feels to receive caring feedback and careless feedback. You learn the exact difference between a judgement and an observation, because you experience it in your own skin. You learn that the other is not an obstacle to your work on yourself; they are its finest tool. And all of that, the next time it falls to you to facilitate a space, will be present — no longer as theory but as bodily memory.

« Awareness, in and of itself, is curative. »

— Fritz Perls

The only thing the circle asks of you today, in the end, is that you accept being seen — with everything in you that resists being seen — and that you accept seeing the others with enough care that what you say to them serves them. If these two things happen, the dispositive will have done its work. And you will carry home, and into your professional practice, a little more space inside the prison — and a little more confidence that, when the water gets rough again, you will not be alone. There will be other eyes that can see what you cannot. And that, you now know, is exactly what you need.

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— End of notes —

Inter-Module Practice Guide

The fertile void: from experience to action

For the period between Module 1 and Module 2

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You have just spent intensive days together — exploring presence, grounding, and what it means to facilitate from a place of contact rather than technique. Now comes the real question:

« What happens when you are back in your classroom, your office, your youth centre — without the safety of the training room? »

This is not homework. It is an invitation to notice what shifts when you try to bring what we have practised into your daily work with young people, clients, or students.

The goal is not to do it perfectly. The goal is to pay attention.

The three pillars of practice

Pillar 1. Taking care of yourself first

Before attempting to support anyone else, your first job is to stay connected to yourself.

Your daily micro-practice

Choose one grounding tool from Module 1 that resonated with you — perhaps conscious breathing, a brief body scan, or simply feeling your feet on the floor before entering your workspace. Practise it for five to ten minutes before your workday begins. That is it. Nothing elaborate. Just showing up for yourself, consistently.

What to notice

- Does anything change in how tired or reactive you feel by the end of the day?
- Do you respond differently when something stressful happens?
- What gets in the way of keeping this small commitment to yourself?

Pillar 2. Bringing it to your work

This is not about creating something new. You already have sessions, classes, or conversations happening in your daily work. The task is simply to bring awareness to how you are during them.

Choose at least one moment in your regular practice — a group session, a class, a therapy hour, a meeting with young people — and use it as your laboratory.

« Your focus is not on what you do. It is on how you are while you are doing it. »

Ask yourself during and after

- Am I breathing?
- Do I notice when I want to “fix” or “rescue” them?
- Can I tolerate silence without rushing to fill it?
- What happens in my body when things do not go as planned?
- When do I leave my body and go into my head?

Do not judge what you discover. Just notice it.

Pillar 3. Reflecting and documenting

Before Module 2, please send a short written reflection (one page maximum) addressing these three questions:

1. A moment you lost your centre

Describe a situation during your practice where you noticed yourself getting anxious, overthinking, or disconnecting from presence. What did you do to come back? Did you manage to return, or did you stay in your head until the end?

2. How your group responded

Did you notice any difference in how the young people, students, or clients reacted when you were more grounded versus when you were not? What did you observe?

3. Your biggest obstacle

What has been the hardest part about maintaining this way of being — whether inside yourself, or in your professional environment?

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Need extra support? If you are facing a particularly challenging situation or feel stuck in your practice, you can request an individual supervision session with the training team during this inter-module period. Just reach out and we will find a time to meet online.*

What to bring to Module 2

To complete your certification, please arrive prepared with:

- **Your written reflection** (printed or digital).
- **A living question** — something about your role as a facilitator, therapist, or educator that you want to share in Module 2.

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« This time between modules is not empty space. »

« It is where the real learning begins. »

The training room gives us a container. Real life gives us the test. Be patient with yourself. Notice what happens. And remember: the aim is not to become someone different. It is to become more fully present as who you already are.

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See you in Module 2.

P A R T

II

Character

How the self gets organised · and how it can be seen

◆ ◆ ◆

EMPATHYE · Module 2 · April 2026

Character as Lifejacket and Prison

A humanistic look at the origin of your professional style

Theoretical notes for participants

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1. What is character, and what was it for?

Temperament vs. character

Before we begin exploring, we need to make a fundamental distinction. Temperament is what you are born with — your biological baseline, the nervous system you arrived with. Some babies are naturally more active, others more quiet. Some are more sensitive to stimulation, others more robust. This is not chosen; it is given.

Character is something different. Character is what you build on top of temperament in response to the environment you grow up in. It is the set of strategies, habits, emotional patterns, body postures, beliefs, and automatic reactions that you developed during childhood to survive your specific family, culture, and circumstances.

Here is the key point: **character is not who you are. It is what you learned to do in order to survive.** This distinction matters because if character were simply who you are, there would be nothing to explore — you would be stuck with it forever. But because character is learned behaviour, it can be observed, understood, and gradually loosened.

The child's intelligent response

Every character structure was once an intelligent solution. The child who learned to be invisible did so because visibility was dangerous in their family. The child who learned to perform and achieve did so because love was conditional on success. The child who learned to take care of everyone else did so because the adults around them were unavailable or

overwhelmed. The child who learned to be tough did so because tenderness was punished or ignored.

None of these strategies were random. Each one was the best possible adaptation that child could find with the limited resources available. In that original context, the character worked. It was a lifejacket that kept us afloat in turbulent waters.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Can you recall a moment in your childhood when the way you learned to behave — being quiet, being helpful, being strong, being funny — genuinely protected you or helped you survive?*

The lifejacket

The character-as-lifejacket served real functions. It helped you navigate your family. It helped you find a role that gave you some sense of belonging and safety. It helped you manage emotions that were too big for a small body. It helped you make sense of a world that was confusing or unpredictable.

And it worked. The fact that you are here today, reading this, means your lifejacket did its job. You survived. You found a way through. Whatever strategy you developed — control, withdrawal, people-pleasing, intellectualisation, rebellion, perfectionism — it got you here. There is no reason to be ashamed of your character. It saved your life.

The prison

Here is where the story takes a turn. The lifejacket that saved the child becomes a prison for the adult. The strategies that were adaptive at five years old become rigid automatisms at thirty-five. The child who learned to be invisible grows into an adult who cannot ask for what she needs. The child who learned to perform grows into an adult who cannot rest. The child who learned to take care of everyone grows into an adult who has no idea what he himself wants.

The prison metaphor is important because it captures something precise: the character is not an external cage imposed on you by someone else. It is a structure you built yourself, from the inside. And because you built it so early, and it became so automatic, you usually cannot see it. You confuse the prison with reality. You confuse your habitual way of being with “who you are.”

The work we are doing this week is not about destroying the prison or throwing away the lifejacket. It is about recognising it as a structure — something you built, not something you are. Once you can see it, you gain a degree of freedom. You can still use the lifejacket when you need it. But you are no longer wearing it 24 hours a day, even when the water is calm.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Think about a behaviour pattern that people close to you have pointed out to you more than once. Something they see that you sometimes struggle to see yourself. Can you trace it back to a moment or period in your childhood where it made sense?*



Figure 1

From lifejacket to prison: the same structure that protected the child limits the adult.

2. The three layers of character

Why three layers, not types

Many systems of personality classify people into types or categories. While this can be useful for quick orientation, it also carries a risk: we reduce a living, breathing, contradictory human being to a label. “I am a Type X” can become its own prison — a new identity to hide behind.

In this work, we are not interested in classifying anyone. We are interested in observing. The three layers we will explore are not boxes to put yourself into; they are lenses to look through. Each lens reveals something different about how your character operates. Together, they give a surprisingly complete picture of the automatic patterns that run your life — and your professional practice.

A brief note on origins

This framework draws on the work of Claudio Naranjo, a Chilean psychiatrist and Gestalt therapist who spent decades articulating the connection between character structure, emotional patterns, and spiritual traditions. Naranjo's contribution was to integrate ancient maps of the human psyche with modern psychology, creating a practical tool for self-observation.

We are using his framework as a map, not as a doctrine. We will not be exploring numerical categories or fixed types. Instead, we will work with three dimensions of character that Naranjo identified as universal: the instinctual drive, the mental fixation, and the underlying emotion. These three layers operate in every human being, regardless of culture, gender, or profession.

Self-observation, not self-classification

The purpose of exploring these three layers is not to arrive at a diagnosis of yourself. It is to develop the capacity for self-observation — the ability to watch your own patterns as they operate, in real time, without immediately trying to change them.

In the Gestalt tradition, this is called awareness: the ability to notice what is happening in the present moment, both internally and externally, without judgement. The three layers we are about to explore are simply tools to sharpen that awareness, to give you a vocabulary for what you are already sensing but may not yet have words for.

> *« Awareness, in and of itself, is curative. »*
>
> *— Fritz Perls*

3. First layer — the basic instincts

What is an instinct?

When we talk about instincts in this context, we are not talking about reflexes or animal drives. We are talking about the basic biological orientation that determines where you put your energy in life. Each human being has three instinctual drives, but one of them tends to be dominant — meaning it gets the lion's share of your attention, energy, and worry.

Think of it this way: every day, you wake up with a certain amount of energy. Where does most of that energy go? What do you worry about first? What do you notice in a room when you walk in? The answer to these questions usually points to your dominant instinct.

The three instincts

Conservation (self-preservation)

This instinct is oriented towards physical survival, material security, comfort, and the management of resources. A person with a dominant conservation instinct is highly attuned to their body, their health, their home, their finances, their routines, and their physical environment.

When this instinct is healthy, it shows as groundedness, practical wisdom, self-care, and a reliable sense of what is needed in material terms. When it is excessive or distorted by character, it can manifest as hoarding, anxiety about resources, excessive control of the environment, rigidity around routines, or a kind of fortress mentality that keeps the world at a distance.

In your work as a facilitator or youth worker: a conservation-dominant person tends to create structured, safe, well-organised spaces. The risk is over-structuring — prioritising physical comfort and logistical order over emotional depth or spontaneity.

Social

This instinct is oriented towards the group: one's place in the social hierarchy, belonging, recognition, roles, and the invisible rules that govern group dynamics. A person with a dominant social instinct is highly attuned to who is who in a room, how power flows, what is expected of them, and how they are perceived by others.

When this instinct is healthy, it shows as social intelligence, the ability to read groups, diplomacy, and genuine care for collective wellbeing. When it is excessive or distorted by character, it can manifest as status anxiety, people-pleasing, over-adaptation to group norms, fear of exclusion, or a chameleon-like quality where the person adjusts their personality to fit whoever they are with.

In your work: a social-dominant person tends to be excellent at reading group dynamics and creating belonging. The risk is losing themselves in

the group — prioritising harmony over truth, or adjusting their facilitation style to what the group seems to want rather than what the group needs.

One-to-one (sometimes called sexual)

This instinct is oriented towards intense connection with specific individuals. It is the drive for magnetism, for depth, for fusion with another. A person with a dominant one-to-one instinct is highly attuned to the quality of their close relationships, to chemistry, to the experience of being fully met by another person.

When this instinct is healthy, it shows as passion, intensity, the capacity for deep intimacy, and a magnetism that draws people in. When it is excessive or distorted by character, it can manifest as emotional intensity that overwhelms others, jealousy, possessiveness, a tendency to create exclusive dyads that exclude the rest of the group, or a constant search for the "special" connection that makes life feel alive.

In your work: a one-to-one-dominant person tends to create powerful individual connections and can hold intense emotional spaces. The risk is favouritism — giving more energy to certain participants who "hook" them, or neglecting the group as a whole in favour of one-on-one dynamics.

The dominant and the dormant

We all have all three instincts, but they do not carry equal weight. Usually one is dominant (it runs automatically, you barely notice it because it feels like "just the way things are"), one is secondary (available when needed), and one is dormant or blind (you consistently neglect it, and this neglect creates a specific vulnerability in your life).

The dormant instinct is often where your biggest growth edge lives. The conservation-blind person who neglects their body and their finances until crisis hits. The social-blind person who is baffled by group politics and feels like an outsider even in their own team. The one-to-one-blind person who has many acquaintances but no deep intimate connections and wonders why life feels flat.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Which instinct do you recognise as your dominant? Which one do you consistently neglect? Think of three concrete examples from the last month.*

The instincts in everyday life

To help you identify your dominant instinct, consider the following scenarios. In each one, notice which response feels most natural to you — not which one you think is "correct," but which one your body gravitates toward automatically.

You arrive at a new place for a week-long residential. What do you do first? If you check the room, test the bed, find out where the bathroom is, check the Wi-Fi, and think about where you will sit at meals — conservation is speaking. If you scan who else is here, who seems approachable, where the social dynamics are forming, and how you will position yourself — social is speaking. If you look for the person who interests you most, who has the most intense eyes, who you feel drawn to spend time with — one-to-one is speaking.

You receive criticism from a colleague. What is your first internal reaction? If you worry about the practical consequences (will this affect my job, my position, my resources?) — conservation. If you worry about what this means for your reputation in the group (do others agree? am I losing status?) — social. If you focus entirely on the relationship with that specific person (do they still respect me? is the connection damaged?) — one-to-one.

You have a free Saturday with no obligations. What do you naturally do? If you organise your house, cook something nourishing, take care of your body — conservation. If you call friends, attend an event, engage in community activities — social. If you seek out one person for a deep conversation, a long walk together, an intimate experience — one-to-one.

None of these responses is better or worse than the others. They simply reveal where your energy flows most naturally. The challenge lies in recognising the instinct you consistently avoid — the one that feels alien, unnecessary, or even threatening.

▶ **Self-observation.** *Think about the instinct you identified as dormant. What would it look like if you deliberately activated it for one day? What would you do differently? And what resistance do you imagine would come up?*



Figure 2

The three instincts at a glance: focus, healthy expression, distortion, blind spot, and how each one shows up in facilitation.

4. Second layer — the mental fixation

What is a fixation?

The mental fixation is the automatic thought pattern that organises your perception of reality. It is the lens through which you look at the world, so pervasive that you usually do not notice it is there — just as a fish does not notice water.

A fixation is not a belief you chose. It is a belief that was installed during childhood, before you had the cognitive capacity to evaluate it. It became the operating system of your mind, filtering what you pay attention to, what you ignore, how you interpret events, and what conclusions you draw about yourself and others.

The sentence you tell yourself without knowing

Every fixation can be expressed as a sentence — the inner monologue that runs in the background of your consciousness. Here are some examples. As you read them, notice if any of them produces a physical reaction in your body — a tightening, a recognition, a discomfort:

- “I must do it right, or it doesn't count.”
- “If I don't take care of them, who will?”
- “I need to stand out, or I'm invisible.”
- “Something essential is missing in me.”

- “I need to understand everything before I can act.”
- “The world is threatening; I must be prepared.”
- “Life should be exciting; pain is to be avoided.”
- “I must be strong; weakness is dangerous.”
- “Conflict is not worth it; peace at all costs.”

These sentences are not rational conclusions. They are survival strategies crystallised into thought. Each one was adaptive at some point — each one helped the child navigate their world. But in the adult, they run on autopilot, distorting perception and limiting contact with what is actually happening in the present moment.

How the fixation filters reality

The fixation does not just colour your thinking — it selects your reality. If your fixation is “I must be prepared,” you will scan every situation for potential threats. You will notice the emergency exit, the person who looks unreliable, the detail that could go wrong. You will not notice the beauty, the playfulness, the invitation to relax. Your fixation is a spotlight that illuminates one part of reality and leaves the rest in darkness.

This is why two people can be in the exact same situation and experience it completely differently. They are not seeing the same world. Each one is seeing the world through their fixation.

Invisible to me, visible to you

Here is the paradox: because the fixation is the lens, not the object, you cannot see it by looking harder. You need a mirror. And that mirror is usually other people — the people who live with you, work with you, or sit in a circle with you for a week in La Almudema.

This is one of the reasons why the feedback circle earlier in the week is so valuable. When someone tells you “what pushes me away from you,” they are often pointing at your fixation in action. Not to hurt you, but to give you what you cannot give yourself: a view of your own glasses.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *What is the sentence that runs most often in the background of your mind? If you are not sure, think about what you say to yourself when you make a mistake, or when you are under pressure. That sentence is probably very close to your fixation.*

5. Third layer — the underlying emotion

What lies beneath the fixation

Underneath every mental fixation, there is an emotion. Not a passing emotion — a deep, structural, lifelong emotional tone that colours the entire character. This is what we call the underlying emotion, or the passion of the character.

This emotion is the engine that drives the whole system. The fixation exists precisely to avoid feeling this emotion fully. The character is the elaborate architecture built around a single purpose: not having to feel this one thing.

The emotion the character is designed not to feel

Here is the core insight: **the character is not designed to protect us from the world. It is designed to protect us from an internal experience.** From an emotion that, at some point in childhood, was too overwhelming, too threatening, or too painful to be felt.

For some, it is anger — the deep, slow, compressed anger of someone who learned that anger was forbidden and who now smiles while burning inside. For others, it is fear — the chronic anxiety of someone who learned that the world is unpredictable and who now controls everything in order to feel safe. For others, it is sadness — the grief of someone who was not seen for who they were and who now performs endlessly to earn love. For others, it is shame — the conviction that there is something fundamentally defective about them that must be hidden at all costs.

The specific emotion varies from person to person, but the mechanism is universal: something is intolerable, so the fixation appears to manage it, and the instinctual drive channels the energy outward so we never have to sit still with what is inside.

Why recognising this emotion is liberating (and terrifying)

When you finally name the emotion that your entire character has been built to avoid, two things happen simultaneously. On one hand, there is an enormous relief — the relief of finally understanding why you do what you do, why you react the way you react, why certain situations trigger you out of proportion. It all makes sense.

On the other hand, there is fear. Because the character has been working very hard for decades to keep this emotion at bay, and now you are proposing to let it in. The internal alarm system goes off: “This is exactly what we have been protecting you from! Do not go there!”

The good news is that you are no longer five years old. You are an adult with resources, with a body that can hold more than a child's body could, and with a group of people around you who are doing the same work. The emotion that was once intolerable can now be felt — not all at once, not forever, but in small, sustained doses that gradually loosen the character's grip.

Not to fix, but to recognise and hold

We want to be very clear about something: we are not here to fix your underlying emotion. We are not here to make the anger go away, or resolve the sadness, or cure the fear. These emotions are part of being human. They are not pathology.

What we are here to do is recognise the emotion, stop running from it, and develop the capacity to hold it without being swallowed by it. In Gestalt terms, this is the difference between being identified with the emotion (I am angry, I am afraid, I am sad) and being in contact with it (I notice anger, I notice fear, I notice sadness). The first collapses the self into the emotion. The second maintains the self while feeling the emotion. That is the goal.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *If your fixation stopped working for one moment — if the automatic thought that protects you went silent — what emotion do you imagine would rise? You do not need to feel it now. Just name it, quietly, to yourself.*

Common misunderstandings about the underlying emotion

There are several misconceptions about the underlying emotion that are worth addressing directly, because they can block the work if left unexamined.

First: the underlying emotion is not the same as the emotion you express most often. In fact, it is usually the opposite. Someone who frequently shows anger may have sadness as their underlying emotion — the anger is the character's way of covering the sadness. Someone who frequently shows cheerfulness may have fear as their underlying emotion — the brightness is the character's way of managing the terror. The emotion you see on the surface is often the defence, not the wound.

Second: the underlying emotion is not a pathology. It is a human experience. Everyone has one. Having deep anger does not make you a violent person. Having deep fear does not make you a coward. Having deep

sadness does not make you depressive. The emotion simply is. It has been there since childhood, it shaped your character, and it continues to operate beneath your awareness. Recognising it is an act of courage, not a diagnosis.

Third: you do not need to "process" or "release" the underlying emotion in order to benefit from recognising it. The therapeutic value is in the seeing, not in the catharsis. Many people believe they need to have a dramatic emotional breakthrough to change. In our experience, the most lasting changes come from the quiet, repeated recognition: "Ah, there it is again. Hello, old friend."

Finally: the underlying emotion is not something to be ashamed of. It is, in a real sense, your deepest truth — the emotional reality that your entire character has been built to navigate. When you can sit with it, even briefly, without running, you are touching the core of who you are beneath all the strategies.

6. How the three layers sustain each other

The system

Now that we have explored each layer separately, it is time to see how they work together as a system. The three layers are not independent — they sustain each other in a self-reinforcing loop:

« The underlying emotion is intolerable → the mental fixation appears as a cognitive defence to manage it → the dominant instinct channels all the resulting energy into a specific area of life. »

For example: someone whose underlying emotion is a deep fear of being unloved develops the fixation "I must be needed by everyone," which channels energy into the social instinct (always scanning for who needs help, who can be pleased, how to be indispensable to the group).

Or: someone whose underlying emotion is compressed anger develops the fixation "everything must be done correctly," which channels energy into the conservation instinct (controlling routines, perfecting systems, managing the physical environment obsessively).

Or: someone whose underlying emotion is an aching sense of emptiness develops the fixation "life must be intense," which channels energy into the

one-to-one instinct (constantly seeking the special connection, the peak experience, the magnetic encounter that makes them feel alive).

Why touching one layer is not enough

This is why simply “knowing your fixation” or “identifying your dominant instinct” is not enough. If you only work with the fixation (cognitive insight), the emotion underneath will simply generate a new fixation. If you only work with the emotion (cathartic release), the fixation will re-install itself as soon as the session is over. If you only work with the instincts (behavioural change), you are rearranging the furniture in the prison without unlocking the door.

To genuinely loosen the character, all three layers need to be seen simultaneously. Not fixed — seen. The moment you can observe your own system in action (I notice my energy going to my social instinct, I notice the fixation telling me I must be helpful, I notice the fear of being abandoned underneath), you create a small space of freedom. You are no longer inside the system. You are watching it. And from that watching position, choice becomes possible.

The body holds the entire map

The character is not only a mental structure. It lives in the body. Your habitual posture, your breathing pattern, the tension in your shoulders or jaw, the way you walk, the quality of your voice, the places where you feel numb and the places where you feel too much — all of this is the character written in flesh.

This is why we work with theatre and the body, not only with conversation. Words can explain the character but the body reveals it. When you see someone freeze in an improvisation, that freeze is the character in action. When someone's voice drops to a whisper at the exact moment they are saying something important, that whisper is the character. When someone crosses their arms, holds their breath, or smiles while describing something painful, that is the character doing its job — managing the intolerable emotion.

« The body does not lie. And it does not need to be translated. The character speaks a universal body language. »

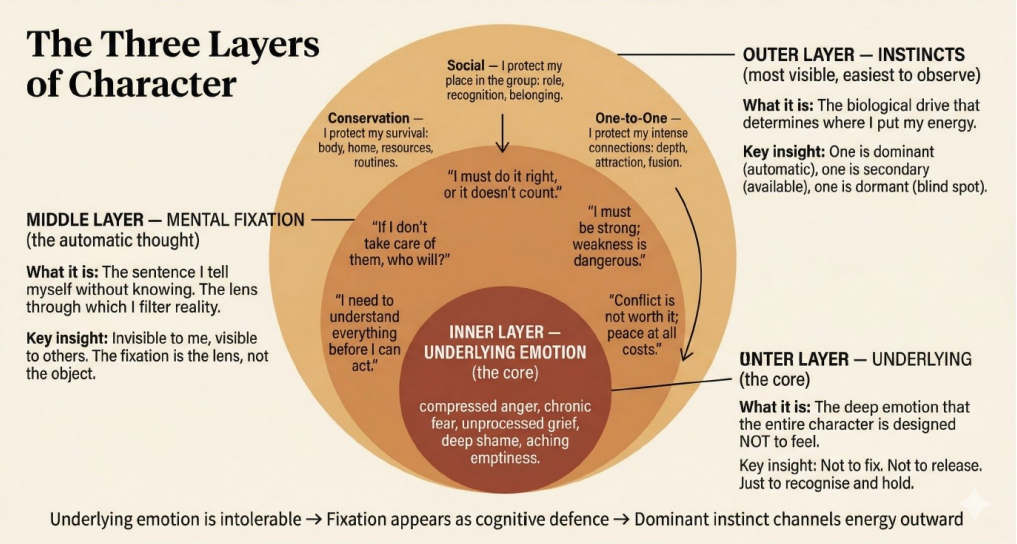

Figure 3

The three layers of character: instincts, fixation, and underlying emotion.

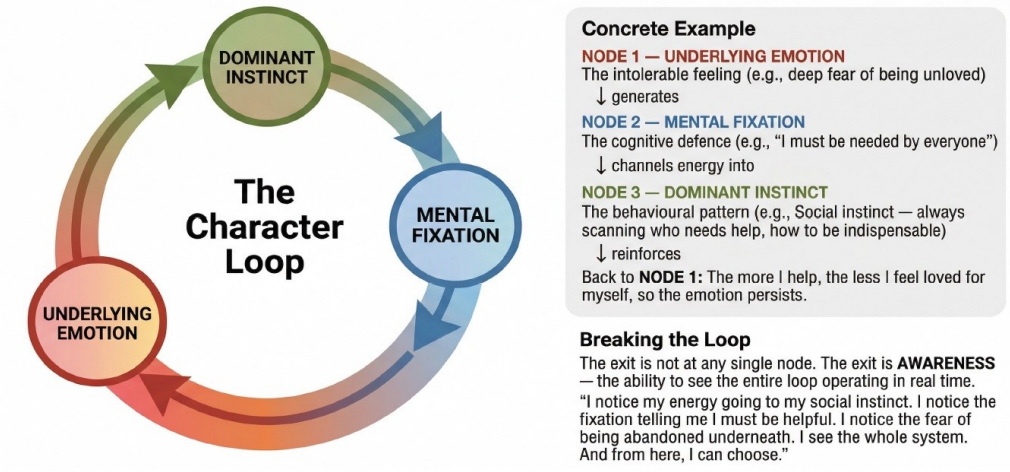

Figure 4

The character loop: how the three layers sustain each other and how awareness breaks the cycle.

7. Character and Gestalt Therapy

What you already know

If you have been paying attention during Module 1, much of what we are describing will sound familiar. The Gestalt tradition has its own language for these phenomena, and the two frameworks illuminate each other.

Character and the cycle of experience

In Module 1, we worked with the Gestalt cycle of experience: sensation → awareness → mobilisation → action → contact → withdrawal. We also observed how this cycle gets interrupted by defence mechanisms: confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection, egotism.

The character is essentially a pattern of habitual interruptions. Each character structure tends to interrupt the cycle at the same point, in the same way, over and over again. The person who always retroflects (turns the energy back against themselves) is living inside a character that says “it is not safe to direct my energy outward.” The person who always deflects (avoids direct contact) is living inside a character that says “direct contact is dangerous.”

The fixation is the story the character tells to justify the interruption. The underlying emotion is what would emerge if the interruption stopped. And the instinct tells you in which area of life this interruption is most active.

Character and the incident of touch

Remember the Incident of Touch on Day 2 of Module 1? Julia touched Viviane without permission. Viviane withdrew. Adeline exploded in rage. The group collapsed. And the facilitator held the space without rescuing anyone.

That single incident was a collision of characters. Viviane's character structure required firm boundaries — her fixation said “the world is dangerous if I let people in.” Julia's character structure did not register the boundary — her fixation may have said “connection requires closeness; distance is rejection.” And Adeline's character structure was triggered by the physical invasion because it resonated with her own history — her underlying emotion erupted before her fixation could contain it.

None of this was personal. It was three character structures colliding in real time. And the facilitator's job was not to analyse it in the moment but to hold the space somatically so the characters could be seen rather than acted out. That is the Tuning Fork: a regulated nervous system that gives the group permission to experience what their characters normally prevent.

Character and the feared scene

Your “feared scene” as a facilitator — the one we worked with on Day 3 of this module — is directly linked to your character structure. The scene you fear is the scene where your character fails. It is the situation that your fixation cannot manage, the moment when the underlying emotion threatens to break through.

If your fixation is “I must be in control,” your feared scene is the group descending into chaos. If your fixation is “I must be liked,” your feared scene is a participant confronting you with anger. If your fixation is “I must understand everything,” your feared scene is being asked a question you cannot answer. The feared scene is a perfect diagnostic of the character.

And here is the liberation: once you see that your feared scene is your character's nightmare, not yours, you can begin to separate yourself from it. You are not your character. The fear belongs to the structure, not to the person.

8. The facilitator's character as a working instrument

Your character does not stay home

When you walk into a room to facilitate a group, lead a workshop, or accompany a young person in difficulty, you bring your entire character with you. Your fixation, your dominant instinct, your underlying emotion — all of it is present. It shapes what you notice and what you miss. It determines who you connect with easily and who you struggle to reach. It defines the invisible rules of the space you create.

This is not a problem. It is a reality. The character is your instrument, for better and for worse. The question is not whether your character is present when you work — it always is. The question is whether you know it is there.

Your instinct defines who you see

Conservation	Social	One-to-one
Excellent at creating structured, safe, well-organised environments. Will notice if the room is too cold, if someone has not eaten, if the	*Excellent at reading group dynamics, noticing alliances and exclusions, creating belonging. May over-adapt to what the group seems to want,*	*Excellent at creating deep, transformative individual connections. May unconsciously give more energy to certain participants who “hook” them, creating*

schedule is running late. May miss the emotional undercurrent in the group because attending to physical infrastructure.	*avoiding necessary confrontation in order to maintain harmony.*	*favouritism that the rest of the group feels but nobody names.*

Your fixation is the invisible frame

Your fixation determines the lens through which you interpret everything that happens in the group. If your fixation is “things must be done correctly,” you will interpret group resistance as a sign that you are failing. If your fixation is “people should be independent,” you will interpret a participant's need for support as dependency. If your fixation is “conflict should be avoided,” you will interpret a productive confrontation as a sign that something has gone wrong.

The fixation is the invisible frame that shapes your facilitation without your knowing it. And the participants feel it. They may not be able to name it, but they respond to it. The group will either adapt to your fixation (giving you what your character needs) or resist it (pushing against the invisible rules you have imposed). Either way, your fixation is running the show.

Your underlying emotion is the climate

This is perhaps the most important insight for your professional practice: the underlying emotion of the facilitator is the emotional climate that the group breathes.

If you carry unrecognised anger, your groups will have an edge of tension that nobody can quite explain. If you carry unrecognised fear, your groups will feel subtly unsafe even when the structure is perfect. If you carry unrecognised sadness, your groups will feel heavy or melancholic without knowing why. The underlying emotion leaks through your presence — through your voice, your posture, your micro-expressions, your breathing — and the nervous systems of the participants pick it up immediately.

This is exactly the Tuning Fork hypothesis: the facilitator's nervous system sets the tone for the group. If the facilitator has recognised their underlying emotion and can hold it without projecting it, the group receives a clear signal of safety. If the facilitator has not done this work, the group receives a confused signal — the words say “this is a safe space,” but the body says something else entirely.

Recognising, not eliminating

We want to repeat this because it is essential: the goal is not to eliminate your character. Your character gives you specific strengths as a facilitator. The perfectionist has an extraordinary eye for detail. The caretaker creates genuine warmth. The controller creates reliable structure. The rebel creates space for authenticity. Each character brings gifts as well as limitations.

The goal is to stop being completely identified with your character so that you can choose when to use it and when to set it aside. When you know your fixation, you can catch it in the act ("ah, there I go again, trying to make everything perfect") and choose a different response. When you know your underlying emotion, you can feel it without projecting it onto the group. When you know your dominant instinct, you can deliberately attend to the areas you normally neglect.

« This is what we mean by presence. Not the absence of character, but the awareness of character. The facilitator who knows their own prison can hold space for others to explore theirs. »



Figure 5

Your character at work: how your underlying emotion, your fixation and your dominant instinct shape the space you facilitate.

9. The way out of the prison

A lifelong practice

Not in one day

Let us be honest: we are not going to resolve in a single day what has been structuring you for decades. The character did not form overnight and it will not dissolve overnight. What we can do in the time we have together is make it visible. And visibility is the beginning of freedom.

Self-observation as ongoing practice

The most powerful tool you take home from this module is not a technique or a theory. It is the practice of self-observation — the habit of watching your own character in action, without judgement and without the urgency to change it.

Self-observation means noticing: “There is my fixation again.” It means noticing: “My energy is going to my dominant instinct again.” It means noticing: “I can feel the underlying emotion stirring, and my character is trying to shut it down.” Each time you notice, you are no longer fully inside the prison. You are watching it from a small distance. And that distance, however small, is freedom.

The somatic experiment

Self-observation alone can become its own trap — another mental activity that keeps you in your head. This is why we combine observation with somatic experiments: small, concrete, body-based actions that invite you to step outside your habitual pattern.

If your dominant instinct is conservation and you always need to know the plan, the experiment might be: arrive at a session without a plan and see what happens in your body. If your fixation is “I must help everyone,” the experiment might be: sit in silence while someone struggles and notice the urge to rescue without acting on it. If your underlying emotion is anger, the experiment might be: let the anger rise for ten seconds longer than you usually allow before suppressing it.

These experiments are not heroic acts. They are small movements toward the unfamiliar. And they work best when they are repeated over time, gently, without forcing.

The difference between changing the character and no longer being its prisoner

We are not asking you to change who you are. We are asking you to stop confusing who you are with the prison you built to survive. You are not your fixation. You are not your dominant instinct. You are not your underlying emotion. You are the awareness that can hold all of these things and still choose.

The character will always be there. The lifejacket does not disappear. But once you can see it, you can choose when to wear it and when to take it off. And when you can do that — even occasionally, even imperfectly — you are no longer a prisoner. You are a person with a character, not a character pretending to be a person.

« That is the work. Not a destination, but a practice. Not a cure, but a way of being with yourself that is more honest, more spacious, and more free. »

▶ **Self-observation.** *What is one small experiment you could try in the next week — one tiny movement away from your habitual pattern — that would let you test the edges of your prison?*

Taking this home — a practice for after La Almudema

When you leave La Almudema and return to your everyday professional context, the most common experience is what we might call the forgetting. The insights from this week will fade. The character will reassert itself. The fixation will resume its normal programming. This is not failure — it is the natural gravitational pull of decades of habit.

To work against this gravity, we suggest a simple daily practice that takes no more than five minutes. At the end of each working day, sit for a moment and ask yourself three questions:

- **Which instinct dominated my energy today?** Where did most of my attention go — to material concerns, to social positioning, or to one specific relationship?
- **Did I catch my fixation in action?** Was there a moment when the automatic thought appeared and I noticed it before it ran me?
- **Did I feel the underlying emotion today, even for a moment?** What happened when I did?

You do not need to write the answers. You do not need to analyse them. You just need to notice. Over time, this simple practice of daily noticing creates a cumulative effect: the character becomes progressively more transparent, and the space between you and your automatic patterns gradually widens.

And when you forget — when a week goes by without noticing, when you find yourself fully identified with your character again — that is not failure either. That is just the character doing its job. Notice the forgetting, and begin again. The practice is not perfection. The practice is returning.

> ▶ **Self-observation.** *Consider sharing your three questions with a colleague or friend who is also interested in this work. Having one other person who asks you "how was your fixation today?" can make the difference between a practice that lasts and one that fades.*



Figure 6

The daily practice: three questions to bring this work home.

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— End of notes —

The Three Centres of Character

Mind, emotion, and instinct — why the way you react to a stimulus tells you more about yourself than you think

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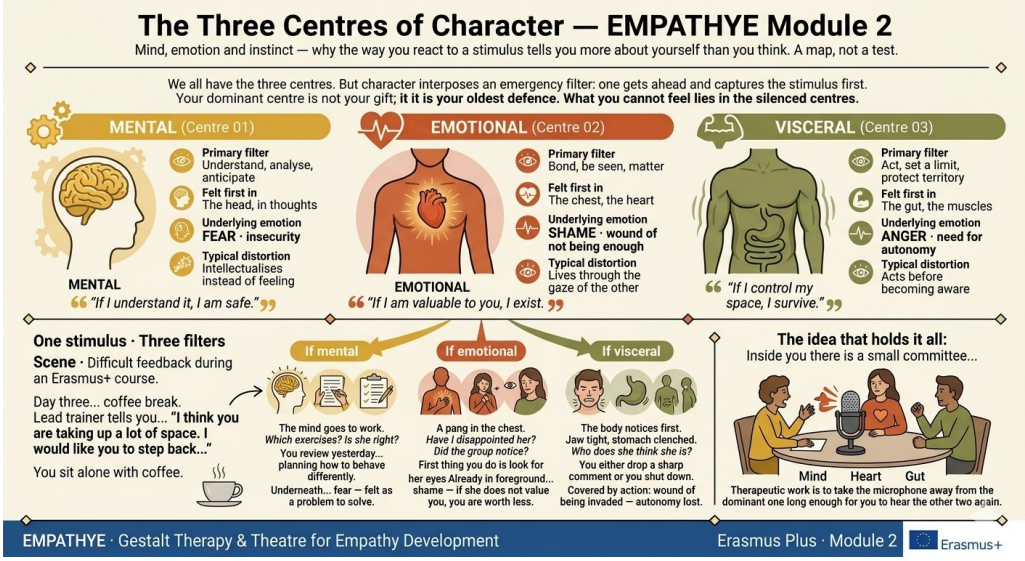

Figure

The three centres at a glance: one stimulus filtered through three different characters.

According to Claudio Naranjo's framework, every human being has three processing centres operating simultaneously: the mental, the emotional, and the visceral. None of them disappears. What defines character is not having more of one and less of the others — but which of the three takes charge first when a stimulus appears. And this happens in milliseconds, before you can even notice it.

This document is an introduction to help you observe yourself with greater precision. It is not a test or a classification. It is a map to recognise the doorway through which your automatic response to the world usually comes in.

1. We all have the three centres

When a stimulus arrives — a look, a criticism, unexpected news, a conflict — your entire organism gets activated. The body reacts. The heart feels. The mind processes. In a person who is in good contact with themselves, the three centres collaborate and the response comes out integrated.

But character interposes an emergency filter. One of the three centres gets ahead of the other two and captures the stimulus before they can intervene. That centre that gets ahead is the dominant one. It is the one that got hypertrophied in childhood to protect you from what you could not feel, and it became your default response.

« The dominant centre is not your gift or your strength. It is your main defence. »

And what you cannot feel lies precisely in the centres you have silenced. That is why someone can have a brilliant mental character and, at the same time, be deeply disconnected from their own fear. Or an exquisite emotional character and, at the same time, have no access to their own anger. Or a powerful visceral character and, at the same time, be unable to hold their own sadness.

2. The three centres, one by one

The mental character

In the face of a stimulus, the first response is to understand. Analyse, anticipate, plan, explain. The mind is so fast that it captures the emotion immediately, transforms it into a concept, and stays with the concept. It is not that the mental person does not feel — it is that they think their emotions before they can inhabit them in the body.

Underlying emotion: fear. The deep feeling of insecurity, of not knowing enough, of not being prepared.

Survival strategy: « if I understand it, I am safe ».

The emotional character

In the face of a stimulus, the first response runs through the bond. How does this affect me, my image, my relationship with the other? The world is evaluated through a relational and identity-based lens. Intellect and action are there, but at the service of an emotional goal: to secure the bond, to secure love, to secure the place one occupies in the heart of others.

Underlying emotion: shame. The deep feeling of not being enough, of not being worthy as one is.

Survival strategy: « if I am valuable to you, I exist ».

The visceral or instinctive character

In the face of a stimulus, the first response is somatic and action-oriented. The gut evaluates immediately whether what is coming threatens the territory, the boundaries, the autonomy. The visceral person reacts by placing a physical boundary, by imposing themselves, or by anaesthetising the body to resist external influence. They have deep emotions and brilliant minds — but intellect and heart always arrive behind the bodily impulse.

Underlying emotion: anger. And the deep need for autonomy, for not being invaded.

Survival strategy: « if I control my space and do not let myself be invaded, I survive ».

3. The three centres at a glance

The table below summarises what each centre is, how it responds, what emotion lies beneath it, and what survival strategy sustains it.

	MENTAL	EMOTIONAL	VISCERAL
Primary filter	*Understand, analyse, anticipate*	*Bond, be seen, matter*	*Act, set a limit, protect the territory*
Where it is felt first	*In the head, in thoughts*	*In the chest, in the heart*	*In the gut, in the muscles*
Underlying emotion	*Fear, insecurity*	*Shame, wound of not being enough*	*Anger, need for autonomy*
Strategy	*« If I understand it, I am safe »*	*« If I am valuable to you, I exist »*	*« If I control my space, I survive »*
Typical distortion	*Intellectualises instead of feeling*	*Lives through the gaze of the other*	*Acts before becoming aware*

4. Three scenes, three filters

The best way to understand this is to see how three different people react to exactly the same stimulus. The scene does not change — only the centre through which it enters.

Scene 1 — Difficult feedback during an Erasmus+ KA1 course

You are taking part in a week-long Erasmus+ KA1 course. It is the third day. After a group dynamic, the lead trainer comes up to you during the coffee break and says, in a calm but direct tone: « I have been watching you and I think you are taking up a lot of space during the exercises. I would like to ask you to step back a bit and let others take the lead. » You are left alone with your coffee, processing. What happens inside you in the next ten minutes?

> ***If your character is mental…***
>
> Almost immediately, your mind goes to work. « Which exercises exactly? When? Is she right or is this just her perception? What will the other participants have thought? How should I behave from now on without going to the other extreme? » You mentally review yesterday's exercises looking for evidence, evaluating, comparing. When you go back to the group after the break, your body is in the room but your head keeps running in parallel. Underneath, almost out of reach: fear. Of looking bad, of not knowing how to do it right, of not measuring up. But you do not feel it as fear. You feel it as a problem to solve.

> ***If your character is emotional…***
>
> Before you think anything, you already feel a pang in your chest. Shame. And right after, sadness: « have I let the trainer down? Will she think of me as annoying now? Will she still see me the same way? And the rest of the group, will they have noticed that she pulled me aside? » The focus is not on the dynamic — it is on the bond with the trainer and your place in the group. When you go back to the room, the first thing you do is look for her eyes to check whether she is upset with you. Underneath, but already in the foreground: shame. The feeling that if she does not value you, you are worth less.

If your character is visceral…

The first thing you notice is the body. Your jaw tightens, or your stomach, or something in your chest. The reaction is immediate and physical: « who does she think she is to say this to me? Is she telling me to shut up? » Anger settles in quickly. Either you let it out during the next dynamic with a sharp comment, or you shut down, you go cold, you stay in the corner without participating for the rest of the day. The body has decided before the head could have an opinion. Underneath, covered by action: the wound of having been invaded, the loss of autonomy. But what shows on the surface is anger.

Scene 2 — The partner who is running late

You have agreed to meet at eight for dinner out. It is a quarter past eight and your partner has not arrived or sent a message. At twenty past eight, still nothing.

If your character is mental…

Your head starts building hypotheses. « There must be traffic. The meeting must have run long. Someone must have called about something important. Or maybe there has been an accident — no, that rarely happens — although if there had been one, the hospital would have called me by now. » The mind is busy generating possible explanations, sorting scenarios. When your partner finally arrives, you already have three theories and can talk about any of them calmly. You have not felt the wait in your body.

If your character is emotional…

You go straight to the relational meaning. « Has he forgotten? Does our date not matter enough to him? Is something going on with him about me lately? » The sadness or the wound appears very early. When your partner arrives, your eyes may be bright, or you may be distant, or very attentive to how they react to your pain. You have lived the wait as a small abandonment.

If your character is visceral...

After ten minutes you have already got up and gone for a walk, or called twice, or decided to go and have dinner somewhere else. Anger settles in quickly and translates into movement. When your partner arrives, either you snap something sharp at them, or there is a heavy, closed silence. You are not mentally turning things over or feeling the sadness beneath: you are protecting your territory.

Scene 3 — A conflict in the group you are facilitating

You are facilitating a session and two participants get into a strong emotional argument. Voices rise. The rest of the group goes still, watching you.

If your character is mental...

You think fast. You mentally review your options: do I intervene now or let it unfold? What does the theory say about this? What would my supervisor do in this situation? The intervention you end up making may be very well thought out — but the group senses that you are slightly absent, as if you were solving a problem rather than being with them.

If your character is emotional...

You feel first. Concern is activated for both participants, for the bond between them, for how the rest of the group is feeling, for whether you are failing them as a facilitator. Your intervention tends to be warm, seeking to repair, to calm, to recover the bond. The risk is to intervene too early because you cannot hold the group's emotion.

If your character is visceral...

Your body reacts before anything else. The impulse appears to stop

> the scene, to set a frame, or — on the contrary — to hold the conflict without blinking, because your body is ready for it. Your intervention is bodily and direct: a raised hand, a firm voice, « let us stop for a moment ». The risk is closing by instinct something that was asking to stay open a little longer.

5. The inner committee metaphor

Imagine that inside you there is a small executive committee made up of three advisors: the Mind, the Heart, and the Gut. The three of them are always in the room.

When a new situation comes up, the healthy thing is for the three of them to deliberate together before deciding what to do. Each one brings something: the mind brings clarity, the heart brings warmth, the gut brings direction and firmness.

But in character, one of the three has staged a coup. A long time ago — when you were small — it convinced itself that the other two were dangerous or useless for surviving in that house, and it took the microphone. It no longer shares decisions: it imposes them. The other two keep speaking, but from the back of the room, and their voices can barely be heard.

« Therapeutic work does not consist of creating new advisors. The three of them are already inside you. The work consists of taking the microphone away from the dominant advisor long enough for you to hear the other two again. »

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The idea that holds all of this together

Your dominant centre is not your essence. It is your oldest defence. Every human being thinks, feels, and has impulses — the difference between a mental, an emotional, and a visceral character does not lie in what we have, but in which of the three centres takes charge before the other two, and — this is what matters — which of the three is overworking in order to cover

up the other two. What you cannot feel lies precisely in the centres you have silenced.

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Tell Me Who You Are

Three improvisation exercises for exploring the dominant centre by losing the habitual tool

A facilitation guide — with witness cards

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Participants have already self-grouped by their dominant centre — mental, emotional, visceral. This block places them in front of the simplest question there is — « who are you? » — with a specific restriction designed so they cannot use the tool with which they habitually answer it. When the tool is gone, what the tool was covering surfaces from below: fear in the mental, shame in the emotional, anger and powerlessness in the visceral.

General frame

Structure

Three groups work in parallel, each one with its own variant of the exercise. Within each group, participants organise themselves into pairs. In each pair, person A answers the question « who are you? » under the specific restriction of their centre, and person B applies the restriction.

Each group has a witness — a facilitator, co-facilitator, or a participant already steady enough to take that role — who reads the instruction card aloud to the group before starting, and who accompanies the work by recalling the rule if anyone steps outside the frame.

Timing

- **Frame and reading of the card:** 3 minutes.
- **First round (A speaks, B applies the restriction):** 3 minutes.
- **Transition silence — no words, only gaze:** 1 minute.
- **Role swap and second round:** 3 minutes.
- **Closing silence:** 1 minute.

- **Pair-level harvesting of what was lived:** 4 minutes.
- **Total per pair:** approximately 15 minutes.

After the pairs, the group returns to a circle. The witness asks the integration question specific to that centre, and each participant replies with a short sentence — no more than thirty seconds per person. Estimated time: 10–15 minutes depending on group size.

Finally, the three groups return to the plenary for the cross-group sharing. One person from each group shares the most powerful thing that emerged. Estimated time: 10 minutes.

Safety valve

Before starting, remind the group that if anyone feels the exercise is triggering something outside the frame, they can say « stop » out loud and the pair stops. Almost no one uses it if they know it is available — but the possibility has to exist. It matters that this valve is introduced without drama: simply as one more pragmatic note of the setup.

What you say to the plenary before splitting the groups

« Each group is going to do the same scene — telling another person who you are — but with a specific restriction. The restriction is designed so you cannot use the habitual tool of your centre. At first it is going to be uncomfortable. That discomfort is exactly the material of the exercise. Do not try to resolve it quickly. Stay in the discomfort and observe what appears in your body when the tool falls away. »

Mental group — « No explaining, no qualifying »

What we take away, and what surfaces

From the mental we take away precision, explanation, nuance. Their habitual way of speaking about themselves is through well-organised complexity: they contextualise, disambiguate, fine-tune. Without that tool, they literally do not know what to say.

What appears when the tool fails is the fear of losing control over how they are seen. The panic of being simplified, of saying something imprecise that they will not be able to correct afterwards. And underneath, the older fear: not really knowing who they are when they cannot think it through.

The restriction

« A tells who they are in short sentences. B interrupts every time A starts to explain, qualify, justify, or contextualise. The interruption is always the same: « Short sentence. Who you are. » »

What you will see in the room

- **The one who stutters.** Starts sentences they cannot finish, goes blank. That stuttering is the gold of the exercise — it is the exact moment when fear surfaces from beneath the mental defence.
- **The one who surrenders to humour.** Replies with jokes, irony, self-parody. A classic mental defence: if I cannot control the frame, I ridicule it. Important to redirect gently back to the rule.
- **The one who gets philosophical.** Drops pseudo-deep phrases like « I am a flowing river ». The witness has to cut it short: that is also nuance. « Short sentence. Who you are. »
- **The one who finds calm.** After two or three interruptions, a mental can arrive at an unexpected place where they say something bare and true. That is the goal of the exercise.

The integration question

« At what exact moment did you notice that your habitual tool stopped working? What appeared in your body in that moment? »

This question is not answered with theory. It forces the participant to identify the bodily instant in which the mental was left without a map. If they reply with analysis, the witness gently returns: « that is analysis. Tell me the moment, the place in the body. »

Emotional group — « Without telling what you do »

What we take away, and what surfaces

From the emotional we take away function as a source of value. Their identity is built on achievements, on the care they give, on relational roles.

When they answer « who are you? » they almost always start with « I am someone who… » followed by an action verb directed at others. Removing that pillar puts them straight in front of the emptiness that opens up when function is withdrawn.

What appears when the tool fails is the shame of not knowing what to say without leaning on what they do for others. The intimate emptiness of « so, without all that, what am I? ». The core wound of not feeling enough as they are, with nothing added.

The restriction

« A tells who they are. They cannot say what they do for a living, what they have achieved, who they help, who they care for, what they bring to others, what their accomplishments are. B listens in silence for three minutes without intervening, holding the gaze. If A falls silent, B stays silent. »

What you will see in the room

- **The one who tries several times and gets stuck.** « I am… well, I am… the thing is, it is hard to say without… ». That blockage is the emptiness arriving. Do not rescue them.
- **The one who gets emotional quickly.** Cries within thirty seconds. Pay attention: in the emotional, crying quickly can be defence, not contact. The witness has to observe whether the emotion is opening something or whether it is avoiding staying with the dry emptiness. If it is defence, B holding sustained silence without comfort is the intervention.
- **The one who describes abstract qualities.** « I am a caring person, committed, sensitive. » That is still function, only generalised. The witness can remind: « those are your qualities. Who are you? »
- **The one who finds something new.** After several failed attempts, a bare sentence appears: « I don't know », « I am someone who is afraid of not being loved », « I don't know who I am without what I do ». There the exercise has done its work.

The integration question

« What did you feel when you stopped being able to do what you usually do to be loved? What appeared in your chest when that tool fell away? »

This question is crucial because the emotional tends to two escapes: staying in the visible drama, or jumping to theory. The question returns them to the body — to the chest — and to the concrete instant in which the tool fell. If they reply with emotional generalities, the witness returns: « that is what usually happens to you. What happened today, in the exercise, in your chest? »

Visceral group — « The usurped decision »

What we take away, and what surfaces

From the visceral we do not take away the centre by removing the body — that would only ask them for self-control, which is a tool they already know well. We take it away by deciding for them. The whole visceral character is built on « I decide about my own. » If another person places themselves above and decides what they say, when they say it, how they say it — and there is no way to rebel without breaking the scene — anger appears immediately.

What appears when the tool fails is the loss of autonomy in its purest form. First the rage at the invasion. And underneath the rage, if the participant can sustain it, the older wound of having been controlled with no way to defend oneself.

The restriction

« A tells who they are. B interrupts every 30–40 seconds with a brief, arbitrary order: « Change. Talk about something else. » « Stop. I don't want to hear that. » « Something else. Faster. » A cannot protest, cannot negotiate, can only obey and keep talking under B's orders. »

What you will see in the room

- **The one who holds it tight.** Tense jaw, contracted body, mechanically obedient. The whole system screaming on the inside.

The most classical visceral defence: swallow the invasion, keep the rage for later.

- **The one who rebels.** Breaks the rule, protests, laughs nervously as a release valve, or turns the scene into combat. This is not a failure of the exercise — it is pure clinical information about intolerance to loss of autonomy.
- **The one who collapses.** After two minutes the voice fades, the body deflates, as if surrendering. This is the most delicate and richest moment: beneath the rage, something older has begun to surface — the childhood powerlessness of not being able to defend what is one's own.
- **The one who turns sarcastic.** Obeys excessively, ironises, turns the rule into mocking performance. An intelligent defence: regaining autonomy through veiled contempt.

Important note for the person playing B

The witness of the visceral group has to keep a particular eye on the one doing the interrupting. The instruction is to be firm, clear-cut, and arbitrary — but not cruel, not humiliating, not raising the voice, not personal. If B oversteps and humiliates, the exercise turns into something else. The key is that B exercises authority without contempt — the way an authoritarian boss, a rigid father, or a civil servant with power would — not the way a bully would.

The integration question

« When the other decided for you without your being able to defend yourself, which emotion appeared first? And what was underneath that first emotion if you stayed there a moment longer? »

This question is designed to take the participant in two steps: first to the rage (the habitual defence, what the visceral does know how to name), and then to what lies beneath if the person could stay there a moment longer. That second level — loss, powerlessness, old sadness at having been controlled — is the clinical gold of the exercise. If the participant stays at the first level, that is fine. If they reach the second, deep material is being accessed.

Closing plenary

After the integration rounds in each group, everyone returns to the plenary. The structure is simple: one person from each group shares with the plenary the phrase or the image that surfaced most powerfully during the exercise. It is not about summarising what was lived, but about sharing one concrete detail.

Guiding questions for the cross-sharing

- **Q1.** « What appeared in your body when the tool fell away? »
- **Q2.** « What did you see in yourself that you didn't know was there? »
- **Q3.** « Which was harder for you — to play A, or to play B? »

What you can name explicitly when closing

If the group is receptive, at the end you can make explicit what the exercise has demonstrated live: that the dominant centre functions as a defence, that when the tool is taken away what was being covered surfaces, and that this links directly to the work that follows on the underlying emotion.

« Your dominant centre is not your essence. It is your oldest defence. What you cannot feel lies precisely in the centres you have silenced. What you have brushed against today in the improvisation is the doorway into the third layer of character, which we will work on after lunch. »

Part Two

Witness Cards

Self-contained instructions for the witness of each group

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The three cards that follow are designed to be printed and given to the witness of each group. The witness reads them aloud to the group before the exercise begins. They are designed to be self-sufficient: the witness does not need to have read the rest of this guide to be able to use them.

Recommendation: print each card on a separate page and, if possible, on cardstock or heavier paper, so they can be held and read comfortably during the exercise.

WITNESS CARD

Mental Group

« No explaining, no qualifying »

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Read this aloud to the group before starting

« You are going to do the exercise in pairs. One of you, person A, is going to tell the other who they are. But with one important restriction: you cannot explain, you cannot qualify, you cannot justify, you cannot contextualise. No « it depends », no « actually », no « well, not exactly ». Short, direct sentences. Just who you are. Person B has a single job: every time A starts to explain or qualify, B interrupts with one single sentence, always the same: « Short sentence. Who you are ». B is not allowed to help, to soften, or to say anything else. Only that sentence — firm and calm — every time A escapes into explanation. Three minutes A. One minute of silence looking at each other without speaking. Role swap. Three more minutes. »

During the exercise — your job as witness

Observe without intervening, except if a pair is fully outside the frame. If B softens and stops interrupting, you can quietly remind them: « interrupt when they start explaining ». If A breaks the rule by saying « it's just that I can't », you can say: « that is also an explanation. Try again. »

After the pairs, gather the group in a circle and ask

« At what exact moment did you notice that your habitual tool stopped working? What appeared in your body in that moment? »

If anyone replies with analysis

Return gently: « that is analysis. Tell me the exact moment, the place in the body. » The goal of the question is for each person to identify the bodily instant in which the mental was left without a map.

WITNESS CARD

Emotional Group

« Without telling what you do »

◆ ◆ ◆

Read this aloud to the group before starting

« You are going to do the exercise in pairs. One of you, person A, is going to tell the other who they are. But with one important restriction: A cannot say what they do for a living, cannot say what they have achieved, cannot say who they help or who they care for, cannot say what they bring to others, cannot speak about accomplishments. Just who they are. Person B has a single job: to listen in silence for three minutes, without intervening, without comforting, without helping. Only watching, only sustaining presence. If A falls silent, B stays silent, sustaining the gaze, without rescuing. Three minutes A. One minute of silence looking at each other without speaking. Role swap. Three more minutes. »

During the exercise — your job as witness

Observe without intervening, except if a pair steps fully outside the frame. If A escapes into describing generic qualities (« I am a sensitive person, committed »), you can quietly remind them: « those are your qualities. Who are you? ». If B breaks the silence to console, remind them: « only presence, no rescuing ».

An important note for this group

If someone gets emotional quickly and cries within thirty seconds, observe whether the emotion is opening something or whether it is avoiding staying with the dry emptiness. In the emotional centre, crying quickly is sometimes defence, not contact. The best intervention is for B to keep the silence, without comfort. The sustained silence is the teaching.

After the pairs, gather the group in a circle and ask

« What did you feel when you stopped being able to do what you usually do to be loved? What appeared in your chest when that tool fell away? »

If anyone replies with emotional generalities

Return: « that is what usually happens to you. What happened today, in the exercise, in your chest, in this concrete moment? ». The question returns them to the body and to the moment, not to theory about themselves.

WITNESS CARD

Visceral Group

« The usurped decision »

◆ ◆ ◆

Read this aloud to the group before starting

« You are going to do the exercise in pairs. One of you, person A, is going to tell the other who they are. But with one important restriction: person B is going to decide for you. B will interrupt when they want, change the topic when they want, cut off what they don't want to hear. A cannot protest, cannot negotiate, cannot ask B to stop. A can only obey and keep talking. B has four orders available, to be used at any moment: « Change. Talk about something else. » « Stop. I don't want to hear that. » « Something else. Faster. » « No. That doesn't interest me. Move on to something else. » None insults, none humiliates. All of them remove autonomy. The rhythm matters: B interrupts every 30 or 40 seconds. Not earlier — A has to be allowed to settle into what they are saying. Not later either — if you give them time, the visceral reorganises and holds. Three minutes A. One minute of silence looking at each other without speaking. Role swap. Three more minutes. »

A very important note for whoever plays B

Your role is to be firm, clear-cut, and arbitrary. Not cruel, not humiliating, not raising the voice, not personal. Exercise authority without contempt — the way an authoritarian boss, a rigid father, or a civil servant with power would. Not the way a bully would. If you go too far, the exercise turns into something else.

During the exercise — your job as witness

Pay particular attention to whoever plays B in each pair. If anyone oversteps and humiliates, gently stop the pair and recall the rule: « firm and arbitrary, not cruel ». If A breaks the rule and protests or rebels, do not

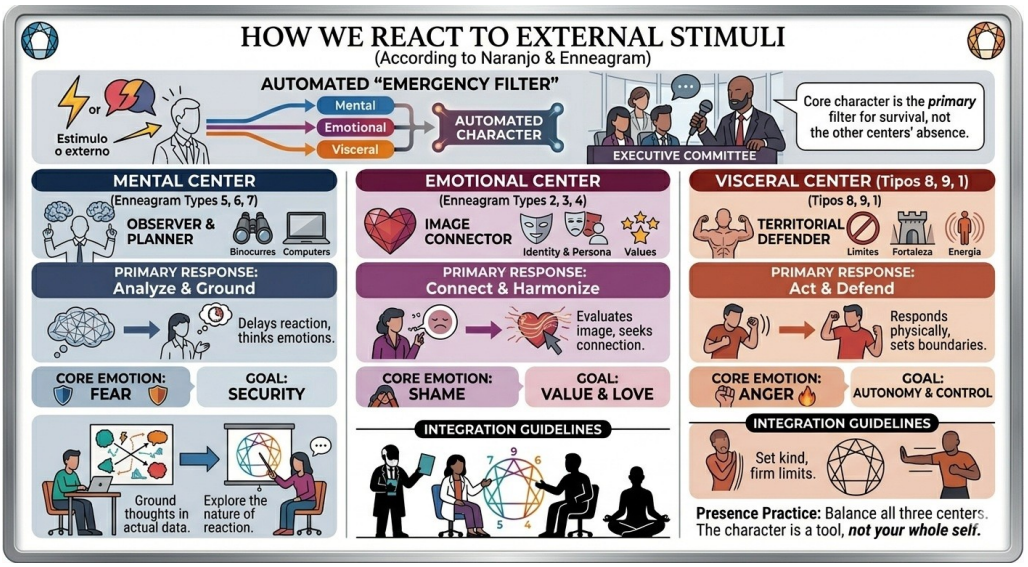
redirect immediately — that moment is valuable information about their intolerance to the loss of autonomy. Only collect what happened once you stop the scene.

After the pairs, gather the group in a circle and ask

« When the other decided for you without your being able to defend yourself, which emotion appeared first? And what was underneath that first emotion if you stayed there a moment longer? »

What is likely to appear

The first emotion will almost always be rage. That is fine — it is the expected response. If anyone can take a step further and reach the second level — powerlessness, loss, old sadness at having been controlled — that is where the deepest material lies. If no one reaches the second level, do not force it. Touching rage with awareness is already enough.



Figure

The same map in Naranjo's frame: the executive committee of character formed by the three centres.

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PART

III

Place in the System

Where you stand inside the family, the group, the field

◆ ◆ ◆

The Place You Take

Physical space, authority, and the dynamics of the group

Theoretical notes from Gestalt and Systemic perspectives

To be facilitated only within a training group with clinical or supervisory frame. Youth workers and educators may read this handout as orientation, not as a protocol to apply.

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These notes gather the work we have just done in the room: the physical place each of you takes, the closeness or distance from the authority figure, and what emerges when a companion takes a place you desired. What you experienced in your body has a great deal of theory behind it. Knowing the theory does not replace the experience, but it helps you to name what happened, and to recognise it when it appears again — in this room, in a training you facilitate tomorrow, or in any group where hierarchy exists.

1. Physical space as language

When you walk into a room, before anyone has spoken, a choreography is already taking shape. Each person chooses a seat. No one chooses at random. The chair you take, the distance at which you sit from the others, the proximity or distance to the facilitator — all of this is a message the body is sending without the mind having authorised it.

What we just experienced is the making-visible of that language. You have been able to feel in your own body which places gave you a sense of safety and which made you uncomfortable, what happened when you considered sitting next to the authority, what appeared when you saw a companion taking that place. None of those reactions was neutral. None of them was accidental.

« Where you sit speaks of where you are in the group. And where you are in the group speaks of where you have been all your life. »

Gestalt and the Systemic perspective, each from its own tradition, agree on something fundamental: physical space is not the stage on which therapeutic work takes place. Physical space is, in itself, the therapeutic material.

2. Gestalt perspective

The here and now of place

2.1. Figure-ground in the group space

In Gestalt, perception is always organised as a figure that emerges against a ground. What you look at stands out because everything else recedes. Applied to a group: when you choose your seat, you become figure against a ground made of the others. And every time someone changes place, the whole configuration reorganises itself.

This is not a metaphor. It is literal. If one of you right now stood up and moved to a different chair, the whole room would change. Not only for you, but for everyone. Distances would be reset, gazes would be redistributed, the feeling of the group would shift. That is why there is so much resistance — often invisible — to changing seats: because you are not just moving your body, you are moving the map of the entire group.

> ***Example.***
>
> For two days you have been sitting more or less in the same places without anyone having established it that way. Today, when asked where you feel most safe and where you feel least safe, many of you have realised that your « usual seat » was not random: it was a position chosen by the body to be close to certain people and far from others, visible on some axes and protected on others. That choice operated as figure against the ground of the group, and none of you had put it into words.

2.2. Contact and withdrawal embodied in proximity

The Gestalt contact cycle — sensation, awareness, mobilisation, action, contact, withdrawal — does not happen only in dialogue. It happens in the body, and especially in how the body positions itself in relation to others. Moving physically closer to someone is a form of contact. Moving away is a form of withdrawal. Choosing a peripheral seat, hidden behind a column,

away from the circle, is a way of interrupting the cycle before it reaches contact.

When the body chooses a place, it is expressing which phase of the cycle that person is in relative to the group. Someone who needs withdrawal chooses the edges. Someone who seeks contact chooses the centre. Someone who wants contact but forbids themselves from asking for it chooses an intermediate spot — close enough to see, far enough not to expose themselves.

2.3. Neurotic mechanisms in the choice of seat

In Gestalt we identify several mechanisms through which we interrupt authentic contact. Each one has its bodily translation in the way we occupy space.

Confluence: sitting glued to another or to the group in order to dissolve into it. There is no differentiated self choosing — the person places themselves wherever the mass settles. In this room, it may be the one who always blends into the middle of the group, neither standing out nor distinguishing themselves.

Retroflection: desiring a place and not asking for it. The impulse to sit next to the authority, or in a more central spot, is turned inward in the form of self-criticism (« I can't ask for that, it's childish »), and the person stays in a place they have not truly chosen.

Proflection: giving the other the seat I want. « You sit here, I'm fine at the back ». We offer to the other what we ourselves desire, because we do not know how to ask for it for ourselves.

Deflection: choosing a place that breaks eye contact, that makes it hard to be looked at or to look. Sitting sideways, near the door, in the corner. The body places itself in a position that allows it to escape the encounter without having to say so.

Egotism: being so preoccupied with one's own seat — whether it is the right one, whether it was well chosen, whether others approve — that the experience of the group is lost. The person never reaches contact because they are too busy with their own staging.

2.4. The central polarity — closeness and fear of closeness

Everything you felt today when considering whether to sit next to the authority — the hesitation, the impulse, the withdrawal, the envy upon seeing another do it — is the bodily expression of a polarity that lives within

each of you: the desire for closeness and the fear of that same closeness. Both exist at once, even though only one becomes visible.

« In Gestalt, a conflict is not resolved by choosing one of the poles. It is resolved by recognising that both live within you, and that each has legitimate reasons to be there. What you have just felt in the room is your living polarity: you want the seat and you fear it, both things at once. »

3. Systemic perspective

Place as position in the system

3.1. Authority as the apex of the system

In every group with structure — a family, a classroom, a company, a workshop — there is an apex where authority concentrates. That apex is not merely a technical function (the one who organises, decides, knows). It is also, and above all, a symbolic place. Whoever occupies that apex is the unavoidable carrier of something greater than themselves: for each member of the group, they are a partial, unconscious re-edition of the authority figures that person has known earlier in life.

This happens to the facilitator whether they want it or not. Diego and Laura, in this room, are themselves — but they are also, for each of you, something that comes from before. One of you may be seeing them through the eyes of your father. Another may be remembering a teacher who marked your life. Another may be reliving the relationship with a boss who humiliated you. And none of that has to do with what Diego or Laura are actually doing — it has to do with the place they occupy in the system.

> ***Example.***
>
> One of you, this morning, felt a sharp pinch when seeing someone sit down next to the facilitator. That pinch was not about the specific person who sat there. It was the reactivation of something much older: the sense that another sibling, another classmate, another companion, had won the father's or the mother's gaze that she herself had not allowed herself to ask for. The body does not distinguish between the present and systemic memory. For the body, the two

> moments are one.

3.2. The order of the system according to Hellinger

Bert Hellinger, from the field of family constellations, proposed a simple and powerful idea: every system has an order, and positions within that order are not interchangeable without cost. Each person occupies a place that belongs to them, and when someone tries to take the place of another — the place of the father, of the eldest sibling, of the absent one — a disturbance occurs that is paid in the form of symptom, tension, illness, or unconscious repetition.

Applied to a formative group like this one: each of you has, over the past hours, taken a place. And in that place, inevitably, the places you have occupied before in your family system of origin get reactivated. The one who was the eldest tends to position themselves as the elder of the group. The one who was the caretaker of her mother tends to position herself close, attentive, watchful. The one who was ignored in their family tends to choose a place where they can remain invisible. And no one has decided this — the body does it on its own.

3.3. The fantasy of taking the place of the authority

There is a universal fantasy that appears in every group: to take the place of the facilitator. To sit in their chair, to occupy their spot, to be for a moment the central figure. That fantasy is rarely confessed, but it is there. And when it appears, it carries with it a very specific mix of attraction and guilt.

From the systemic perspective, that fantasy re-enacts something very ancient: the childhood wish to take the place of the father or mother. To be grown up. To hold the power. To be looked at with the gaze that father and mother give to their partner, and not with the one they give to the child. That wish is universal and, up to a point, healthy — it is part of the process of differentiation. But it carries a shadow: the guilt of occupying a place I feel does not belong to me, the fear of punishment for the symbolic usurpation, the sense of betraying the one who legitimately holds that place.

That is why, when someone in the group dares to sit next to the facilitator, two things happen at once: that person experiences both the satisfaction of the desire and the anxiety of the guilt. And the other people in the group experience something even more complex — envy of the one who dared,

unconscious anger toward them, and, sometimes, a small relief at not having been the ones who took the risk.

3.4. Lateral envy — when an equal sees another close to power

This is probably the most uncomfortable material of the exercise. What appears when a companion sits next to the facilitator and you stay in your seat without having asked. That bitter sensation, that « who does he think he is », that pinch in the chest. Lateral envy.

From the systemic perspective, lateral envy is not a moral defect. It is the reactivation, in the here and now, of sibling jealousy: the childhood sense that my brother or sister received from father or mother what I also wanted and could not get. All siblings have felt this at some point, and only children have felt it by projecting it onto cousins, classmates, or friends. It is a normal systemic inheritance.

What matters is not that the envy appears, but what we do with it. There are two possible movements, and both are deeply revealing.

First movement: silence it. The envy appears and gets hidden. The person stays in their seat, smiles on the outside, but inside there is resentment. Throughout the day, that envy may come out in the form of subtle criticism toward the one who dared, distance from the authority, or disconnection from the group. None of these gestures have to do with what actually happened — they all have to do with what could not be acknowledged.

Second movement: recognise it. The person allows themselves to feel the envy and, instead of turning it into judgement, they listen to it. The envy then transforms into information. « I also wanted that seat and I did not dare ». From there, they can ask themselves what stopped them. And often, in that question, a very old story appears: the child who learned not to ask, not to stand out, not to want too much.

> ***Example.***
>
> This morning, upon seeing a companion ask for the seat next to the facilitator, one person felt a sting of envy. If she stays only with the judgement (« how cheeky, what a need for attention »), the judgement protects her from having to look at something of her own. But if she allows herself to listen to the envy, she discovers another layer: she too wanted to move closer. And behind the wanting to move closer, the question appears — why did I not dare? That

> question is the beginning of the work.

3.5. Asking for a place as an act of differentiation

In systemic language, to differentiate means to step out of the place one occupied in the system of origin in order to take one's own place. We all come from a family system where we had a role. No one has fully chosen that role — we received it through the dynamics of our home, through the moment we were born, through the needs the adults had without knowing it.

Daring to ask for a different seat than usual, in a group of adults, is a small act of differentiation. It looks like a trifle — changing chair — and yet it mobilises the entire internal system. Because you are not just changing seats — you are changing position. And position is loyalty. Staying in the seat we always occupy is loyalty to the system of origin. Moving is, in a way, a betrayal of that loyalty — with love, but a betrayal nonetheless.

« That is why it is so hard to ask for a different seat. It is not about what the people in today's group may think. It is about what the members of your family of origin think, symbolically — because they still live inside you. »

4. Integration — what the body knows before words

4.1. Why this exercise produces material so quickly

You will have noticed that this work, although it seems simple — change seats, observe what happens — has mobilised in many of you more than hours of conversation could. The reason is that the bodily choreography of the group is pre-verbal. What your body does when it chooses a seat flies below the radar of the conscious mind. And precisely for that reason, when it is made visible — when what the body was saying is named — fresh material appears, unworked, undefended.

Words organise and protect. When someone tells a story, they have already had time to edit it, soften it, justify it. The body, on the other hand, does not edit so easily. When your body resists sitting next to the facilitator, or pulls you toward it, or tenses when it sees someone occupy the desired seat, there is no editing yet. What is there is the raw truth.

4.2. Reading the map of the group

The spatial distribution of a group is a map that facilitators read constantly, often without naming it. Who sits where, who changes seats and who doesn't, who moves closer to authority and who moves away, who seeks out whose company. All of this is systemic information about the group.

As professionals who facilitate groups, learning to read this map is one of the most subtle and valuable skills. It does not consist of interpreting out loud what you see — that would be intrusive. It consists of having the information available in order to understand what is happening in the field when tension, a block, an alliance, or an isolation appears.

4.3. The value of moving the seat

Changing seats consciously, even just once, produces a small unblocking. It breaks the inertia of the system. It allows the person to experience that the place is not a fixed destiny, that there is more than one way to be in the group, that position can be chosen.

This is a transferable learning to any system you will inhabit: family, work, partnership, community. The gesture of reviewing the place one occupies — and daring to move it if necessary — is one of the most liberating gestures an adult can make.

5. Connection with the work of the module

This exercise on physical space connects directly with the rest of the work we are doing these days. Here are two bridges so that you take the integrated perspective with you.

With the three centres of character

The choice of seat is influenced by each person's dominant centre. A mental character tends to choose a seat that allows them to see the whole room and keep the map of the group under control. An emotional character chooses based on the bond — close to someone with whom they feel recognised, or close to where they can take care of the group. A visceral character chooses by territory and autonomy — the seat that lets them leave quickly, the one that gives them space, the one that does not force them to feel watched from behind.

With character as lifejacket and prison

The seat you always take is, in many cases, the bodily version of your lifejacket. Where the body learned to place itself in order to survive the

original system. The question this exercise opens is the same one that opens character work: what would happen if I placed myself somewhere else?

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The idea that holds these notes together

Where you sit is not a logistical detail. It is a bodily declaration about where you are in this group, and echoes of where you have been in the systems that formed you. Reading that declaration — both your own and that of others — is part of the work of a conscious facilitator. Daring to change place, when needed, is part of the work of a conscious person.

6. References and further reading

If you want to deepen the ideas behind this exercise, these are solid English-language sources. The first group anchors the Gestalt reading of place, contact, and group process. The second group anchors the systemic reading of position, order, and transgenerational inheritance.

Gestalt perspective

Perls, F., Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P. (1951). Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. New York: Julian Press.

> *The foundational text. Figure–ground organisation and the contact cycle — the conceptual spine of sections 2.1 and 2.2 — come from here.*

Polster, E. & Polster, M. (1973). Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Contours of Theory and Practice. New York: Vintage Books.

> *Accessible reference for the interruptions of contact (confluence, retroflection, deflection, egotism) as they appear in section 2.3.*

Zinker, J. (1977). Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

> *Classic treatment of polarities and the developmental process of a Gestalt group — useful for the polarity work in section 2.4.*

Feder, B. & Frew, J. (Eds.) (2008). Beyond the Hot Seat Revisited: Gestalt Approaches to Group. New Orleans: The Gestalt Institute Press.

> *The English-language reference on Gestalt group work. Chapters by Kepner, Philippson and Bloom directly address the group-as-a-whole and the facilitator's place in the field.*

Systemic perspective

Hellinger, B., Weber, G. & Beaumont, H. (1998). Love's Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships. Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen.

The primary English source on Hellinger's orders of love and systemic belonging — the frame for sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.5.

Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. & Spark, G. (1984). Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

The conceptual origin of « loyalty » as a systemic force, which is what makes the act of moving seats so costly (section 3.5).

Bowen, M. (1978). Family Therapy in Clinical Practice. New York: Jason Aronson.

Source for differentiation of self — the theoretical ground under « asking for a place as an act of differentiation ».

Yalom, I. D. & Leszcz, M. (2005). The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy (5th ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Standard reference on group dynamics, transference to the leader, and sibling rivalry in groups — the cross-tradition background for sections 3.1, 3.3, and 3.4.

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— End of notes —

On Saving the Parents

A clinical and strategic analysis

From the training materials of Diego Marín, Gestalt psychotherapist

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« If you find yourself resisting this idea, you may be operating from unresolved counter-transference — or from the need to become the « good parent » your patient never had. »

What follows is the clinical and strategic reasoning — without softening the blow — for why « saving the parents » (both systemically and phenomenologically) is essential for patient progress, and why aligning yourself with the « villain parent » narrative constitutes a serious technical error.

1. The principle of loyalty and origin

The patient is fifty per cent their mother and fifty per cent their father. This is biological and psychic fact. If you validate the notion that the parent is « pure evil » or « a complete mistake », you are implicitly confirming that half of the patient is garbage.

The mechanism works like this: the inner child prefers to believe « I am bad » (because this offers hope — if I change, I will be loved) rather than « my parents are bad » (because that means I am alone in a hostile universe and my very origin is rotten).

« If you align with the pain against the parent, the patient may experience momentary relief — but at a deeper level you reinforce their self-loathing. You cannot hate your origin without hating yourself. »

2. The introject — the parent within

In Gestalt, we work with introjects. The « real » parent may be dead or estranged, but the « internal » parent is running the patient's life right now. If you attack the external parent, the patient will unconsciously defend the internal one. This is invisible loyalty at work.

« Saving the parent » does not mean justifying abuse. It means finding the humanity behind the act. It means rescuing the intention — however clumsy or pathological — so the patient can integrate that figure rather than split it off.

3. The hope of love

Every neurotic patient maintains an unfinished business — an open gestalt — with their parents: the need to be seen and loved. If you confirm that « there was no love » or that the parent was a monster incapable of loving, you are closing the door to healing. You are issuing an emotional death sentence: « You were never loved because there was no one capable of loving you. »

The clinical truth is this: even in highly pathological parents, there are usually moments — micro-instances, distorted intentions of love. Rescuing that (« saving the parent ») allows the patient to say: « I was loved, even if it was done poorly, even if it was only a little. I am worthy of love. »

4. The drama triangle and your role

This is where you must examine your own needs as a therapist.

If you align with the victim against the persecutor (the parent), you enter the Karpman Drama Triangle. The patient becomes the Victim, the parent becomes the Persecutor, and you become the Rescuer.

This is seductive for the therapist's ego (« I understand you, I am the good one »), but it is poison for the patient's autonomy. You keep them infantilised, looking to you as the ideal parent, preventing them from taking responsibility for their adult life.

« Your job is not to compensate for what they did not receive. Your job is to help them stand on their own feet — and that

requires integrating the reality of their parents exactly as it was, with both light and shadow. »

5. The difference between validating and aligning

These are two distinct operations, and confusing them is a common error.

Validating the pain sounds like this: « I see that hurt you deeply. It was unfair, and you felt alone. » This is necessary.

Aligning with the narrative sounds like this: « Yes, your father was a bastard who didn't love you. » This is iatrogenic.

You must validate the experience of the wounded child while sustaining the understanding of the adult.

Your blind spot — a direct challenge

If this framework grates on you, ask yourself:

- Who have I failed to save in my own history?
- Am I projecting my rage against my own parents onto my patients' parents?

The goal

Stop viewing the patient's parent as « the enemy to be defeated. » The enemy is not the parent — it is the patient's fixation on the past.

« Your therapeutic objective is for the patient to be able to say: « My parents gave what they could, with their limitations, and that was enough to give me life. The rest, I give to myself. » »

Only then does therapy reach completion.

> ▶ **Exercise for supervision or peer reflection.**
>
> *Identify a case where you feel « saving the parent » is impossible.*

> *Bring it to supervision and examine: What would it mean to find the humanity in that parent without excusing their behaviour? Where does your resistance come from?*

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— End of notes —

PART

IV

Deep Work

Witness, feared scenes, mutual therapy, Gestalt theatre

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The Power of the Witness

In therapeutic and group work

For Gestalt therapy training groups

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As Gestalt therapists, you probably sense this intuitively — but let us give it theoretical structure and strategic rationale, so you stop underestimating the power of the « other ».

Yes, it is true: the presence of another person in therapeutic work is not a nice addition — it fundamentally changes what is possible. And no, it is not magic. It is the physics of consciousness.

> *« Working alone has a very low glass ceiling: your own ego. When you work solo, you are both judge and defendant. The ego is an expert at hiding from itself. The presence of a witness does not just « help » — it ontologically alters the reality of what is happening. »*

What follows is a breakdown drawing from Claudio Naranjo, field theory, and affective neurobiology that explains why this is the case.

1. The Naranjo perspective — the ego is relational

Naranjo taught that neurosis (character) was not formed in a vacuum. It was formed in relationship with others — parents, society — as a defence mechanism.

The logic

If your « mask » was built to be seen — or to hide — from an « other », you cannot fully dismantle it in solitude. It is like trying to rehearse a dialogue alone and expecting it to prepare you for the real conversation. It will not.

The mask only becomes visible in the presence of someone it was designed to fool.

The effect

The witness acts as a reality anchor. In solitude, your mind can rationalise, dissociate, or minimise a painful emotion. When someone else is present, the escape route narrows. The witness's presence forces you to sustain the form (the gestalt) instead of collapsing it.

The Sangha

Naranjo emphasised the importance of the group — the Sangha — not just for support, but for friction. The witness neutralises the self-indulgent fantasy. The group does not let you off the hook the way your own mind will.

2. Existential validation

The experience that is not witnessed feels unreal

From a humanistic perspective — and touching on Martin Buber's I-Thou — pain or experience that is not witnessed tends to feel unreal, even hallucinatory.

The original trauma

Often, the trauma is not just what happened to you — but that you lived through it alone, in the absence of an empathic witness. Alice Miller calls this person the lucid witness. The absence of that figure is frequently more damaging than the event itself.

The repair

When you relive an experience in the presence of a witness, you are rewriting the neurobiological story. You move from « this is a madness I feel alone » to « this is an objective fact that another human being is seeing and validating ». That shift pulls the experience out of the shadow and integrates it.

3. Neurobiology — co-regulation and safety

This is where the science dismantles the myth of the solitary hero. Your autonomic nervous system constantly scans the environment for safety — what Stephen Porges calls neuroception.

Borrowed safety

If you enter deep trauma alone, your amygdala can hijack you (dissociation or panic). If there is a regulated, present witness — operating from ventral vagal — your nervous system borrows that calm. You literally use another person's regulation as scaffolding for your own.

Depth of access

This allows you to descend into emotional depths that your reptilian brain would never permit if you were alone — because your brain interprets solitude in moments of vulnerability as mortal danger. The witness is your safety rope for going down into the well. Without it, your system pulls the emergency brake long before you reach the material that actually needs processing.

4. Shame as the guardian

Shame is the emotion that says: « If they see me as I am, they will reject me. »

The paradox

You cannot heal shame in solitude. It is impossible. You can only heal shame by exposing what feels « shameful » before a witness and not receiving the expected judgement. That experience of « I showed the worst of me, and I was not destroyed » is the antidote. There is no solitary equivalent.

The mechanism

When you work alone, you unconsciously avoid zones of toxic shame. With a witness, the tension increases — but if you push through that barrier, the release is exponentially greater. This is the difference between mental rumination and genuine therapeutic intimacy.

5. Field theory — Lewin and Perls

In Gestalt, the organism / environment field is indivisible. When you introduce a witness, you change the field. Energy no longer circulates in a closed loop (you with yourself, which is usually retroflection) but opens toward the contact boundary. What was « mental noise » becomes a clear figure. The act of expressing before another converts stagnant energy into action.

« This is not philosophy. This is the practical reality you see every day in your consulting rooms: the patient who has « thought about this a thousand times » but only breaks through when they say it out loud, to you, while you are looking at them. »

The bottom line

If you continue to prioritise or validate solitary work as equivalent to accompanied work, you are deceiving yourself and, more importantly, your patients.

- **Working alone:** you can obtain intellectual insights and some degree of regulation.
- **Working with a witness:** you obtain character restructuring.

The opportunity cost: when working without a witness, you spend roughly fifty per cent of your energy managing your own safety and dissociation. With a witness, you can channel one hundred per cent of your energy into the process of transformation.

A note for you — as therapists, and as people

Stop trying to process your own blind spots in solitude. It is inefficient and, frankly, a form of avoidance disguised as discipline.

Seek supervision or therapy where your only task is to be seen — especially in the areas where you feel rage or shame. Those are precisely the territories your ego will never let you explore alone.

If the idea of being fully seen makes you uncomfortable, that discomfort is the map. Follow it.

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« The wound that was made in relationship can only be healed in relationship. »

— Training principle, Diego Marín

Feared Scenes

The hidden architecture of what scares you as a trainer

To be facilitated only within a training group with clinical or supervisory frame. Youth workers and educators may read this handout as orientation, not as a protocol to apply.

A working handout in nine parts

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« The feared scene is not waiting for you in the future. It is already happening in your body, right now, every time the thought of it crosses your mind. Working it in the group is, simply, making visible what is already alive. »

1. Why feared scenes exist

Every youth worker, trainer, or facilitator carries, somewhere in the body, a catalogue of situations they hope will not happen. The participant who falls apart in the middle of a session. The group that turns against you. The moment you go blank in front of thirty expectant faces. The evaluation where someone tells you it was not good enough. Each of you has your own scenes. Each of you pretends, most of the time, that you do not.

Feared scenes are not a sign of weakness. They are a sign of implication. Only those who care about their work fear failing at it. What matters is not whether you have feared scenes — you do, we all do — but what you do with them. Left unseen, they govern your practice from the dark, producing small avoidances, micro-decisions, unconscious over-preparation. Made visible, they become one of the most valuable tools for professional development you can access.

But there is something deeper still. A feared scene is rarely only professional. Behind every professional fear there is a biographical echo,

and behind the biographical echo there is often a systemic loyalty. The reason a particular situation scares you and not another is not random — it touches something in your history. Something that happened, something that almost happened, something you saw happen to someone you loved.

« You do not only fear what might happen. You fear what already happened, and what might happen again through you. »

2. The three layers of a feared scene

A feared scene is never one thing. It is three layers stacked on top of each other, and understanding the difference is the first step of the work. The three layers are not of equal weight — they are hierarchical. The outer layer is what you notice first. The inner layers are what actually organise the fear.

Layer 1 — the manifest layer (technical)

This is how the fear first appears to you. It shows itself as a concern about competence, about performance, about technical adequacy. « I will forget the next step. » « I will not know how to answer. » « The dynamic will fall flat. » « I will lose the thread in front of the group. »

This layer is real — trainers do need technical skill — but it is almost never the actual core of the fear. It is the doorway. If you stay here, you end up over-preparing, writing longer and longer scripts, rehearsing obsessively, and the fear does not go away because you have not met what was actually scaring you.

« The technical layer is the entrance. It is almost never the core. »

Layer 2 — the relational layer (vincular)

Beneath the technical concern, there is almost always a relational concern. Not fear of failing at the task, but fear of what happens between you and someone — a participant, the group, a co-facilitator, an authority watching. « The participant who falls apart and I do not know how to hold them. » «

The conflict between two members that I cannot stop escalating. » « The person who stands up and leaves. » « The group that turns cold on me. »

The relational layer is more painful to name than the technical one, because naming it means acknowledging that the fear is not about your skill but about the bond. About being seen as inadequate, cold, cruel, incompetent. About the possibility of being rejected, abandoned, despised by someone whose regard you want.

Layer 3 — the structural layer (characterological and systemic)

This is the deepest layer and the one that explains why this specific scene, and not another, is the one that scares you. Here we are no longer talking about the external situation. We are talking about who you become inside the situation.

The feared scene is not frightening because of what happens — it is frightening because of the person you become when it happens. The perfectionist mental trainer who collapses at the first sign of criticism. The emotional caretaker who loses the frame trying to rescue a participant. The visceral facilitator who responds to challenge with anger and then has to clean up afterwards. The fear is not of the scene. It is of the character who takes over you in that scene.

And there is one more turn here. That character, that automatic role you fall into, is not only characterological. It is also positional — it is a place you occupied first in your family system, and that you have been occupying ever since, now wearing the clothes of a trainer.

- **The perfectionist** often occupies the place of « the one who holds the system together » — the child who could not fail because the family needed them not to fail.
- **The rescuer** often occupies the place of « the one who compensates a lack » — the child who learned to fix what adults around them could not fix.
- **The reactive** often occupies the place of « the one who expresses what no one else dares to say » — the child who carried the anger of the system.

This gives us two key concepts that will return throughout this work:

Conserved role (Moreno): the role you learned to play in early life and that keeps activating itself, intact, decades later, whenever the conditions resemble those in which you first developed it. You do not choose it — it chooses you.

Repeated destiny (Hellinger): the pattern that replays through you, without your consent, because of an invisible loyalty to someone in the system who lived it before you.

3. How the layers connect — a practical tool

Knowing the three layers is useful only if you can use them. Below are three of the most common technical fears trainers name, and the question that takes you one layer deeper each time. This is not theory — it is a pocket tool you can use on yourself the next time a fear appears.

> **If the fear is:** *« I will go blank in front of the group. »*
>
> **Ask yourself:** *In front of whom exactly? Whose eyes are watching you when you imagine that scene?*

> **If the fear is:** *« The group will turn against me. »*
>
> **Ask yourself:** *Who does that group remind you of? What is the first memory of a group that turned against you?*

> **If the fear is:** *« I will lose control of the session. »*
>
> **Ask yourself:** *When did you lose control before? And what happened then? Who was watching? Who was not there?*

Each of these questions does the same move: it takes a manifest fear and asks you to find the biographical echo beneath it. The answer almost never comes immediately. Let the question sit in your body for a few hours or days. The answer will arrive when the body is ready.

4. Two paths for working a feared scene

When you bring a feared scene into the group to work on, you will choose between two paths. Both are valid. Each produces a different kind of learning. The choice is not trivial — it depends on what your material needs, and what you can currently tolerate.

4.1 · The Moreno path

Reliving the scene from inside

What this path is

You, the protagonist, enter the scene. You play yourself. You choose people from the group to play the other agents — the participant, the co-facilitator, the authority figure, whoever is in the feared scene with you — and you improvise through the situation in the first person. The scene is played not as it happened, but as it is feared, with the full weight of the affect.

What this path gives you

Direct access to the somatic and emotional material. You do not think the scene — you live it. The body registers what it had been protecting itself from. In the right conditions, something unhooks: a sentence that could not be said before finds its way out, a gesture long frozen becomes possible again.

The three key Moreno tools

« Role reversal »: you swap roles with another character in the scene. You become the feared participant, the harsh evaluator, the silent group. You see and feel what it is like from their place. Often the most revealing moment of the whole work. « The double »: another group member stands behind you and speaks the sentences you are not able to say yet. Their voice carries what yours is choking on. You can repeat the double's words if they fit, or refuse them if they do not. « The mirror »: you step out of the scene for a moment and watch someone else playing you. Seeing yourself from outside is sometimes the only way to recognise the automatism you have been caught in.

The main risk

You do not relive the scene — you repeat the pattern inside it. You enter the scene wanting to meet something new, but the conserved role activates and you end up rehearsing, one more time, the same response you have always had. The facilitator's job is to notice this and introduce a tool (reversal, double, mirror) that breaks the automatism.

« The goal of the Moreno path is not to express. It is to disidentify from the automatic role. »

4.2 · The Hellinger path

Seeing the scene from outside

What this path is

You, the protagonist, stay outside the scene. You choose one person from the group to play yourself, and you choose others to play the other agents — the participant, the co-facilitator, the absent parent of the participant, the ghost of your own first teacher. You position them in space as your body tells you, and then you step back. You observe. The facilitator guides a slow unfolding in which the chosen representatives report what they sense from their positions.

What this path gives you

A whole-field view of the scene. You see the configuration from outside — who looks at whom, who turns away, who is missing from the picture, whose position has been usurped. The invisible flows of the system become visible. You discover, sometimes with shock, that the fear you thought was about the participant is actually about an ancestor who used to look just like that participant, or that the group you fear occupies the same place your family did when you were seven.

What you look at

Direction of the gaze — who looks where, who avoids looking where. Distance — who is close, who is far, who should be close and is not. Exclusions — who is not in the scene but should be, who is being kept out, whose absence is organising everything. Altered hierarchy — children standing where parents should stand, teachers occupying parental positions, participants carrying what the trainer should be carrying.

A key phrase

What appears here is not psychological. It is phenomenological. You are not interpreting — you are reading what the field shows.

The main risk

The protagonist intellectualises what they see, from the safety of the outside, without ever taking their own place. You can become fascinated by the system you are watching and forget that you are in it. The facilitator will usually, at the end of the work, invite you to step into the scene and take your own place — not symbolically, but bodily.

« The Hellinger path shows you the field. The final step is that you take your place in it. »

5. Choosing the path — clinical criteria

Neither path is better. Each path meets you where you are. Below are four practical guidelines based on what you bring to the work.

- **High emotional activation?** The scene arrives with strong affect, tears close to the surface, a clear charge in the body. → Moreno. The psychodramatic path will let that affect move. Stopping to observe from outside would be intellectualising what needs to be lived.
- **Confusion or repetition without awareness?** You know the scene repeats but you cannot see why, or every time you try to think about it your mind blurs. → Hellinger. The systemic view clarifies what psychological introspection cannot.
- **Characterological rigidity?** You are so identified with your role that entering the scene as yourself would only reinforce it. → Start outside, with Hellinger. Seeing yourself from outside may be the first way to recognise what you cannot feel from inside.
- **Emotional disconnection?** You can talk about the scene but you feel nothing. → Enter inside, with Moreno. The body reached through action often bypasses the disconnection.

6. What is not shown but is in the scene

A feared scene always carries more than what the protagonist consciously brings. Three invisible layers are almost always present, and naming them helps the work go where it needs to go.

6.1 What is excluded

Someone — or something — is being kept out of the scene, and their absence is organising it. A person whose presence would change everything but who is not named. An emotion that cannot be felt because it would be too much. A part of the self that has been sent into exile.

In Gestalt terms, this is the figure-ground reversal: what is kept in the background is often what gives the figure its shape. In systemic terms: what has been excluded from the system presses for inclusion through symptoms, fears, repetitions.

- **Excluded persons:** the co-facilitator whose opinion you fear, the parent of the participant whose suffering you sense, the first teacher who taught you what a trainer should be.
- **Excluded emotions:** anger in the rescuer, tenderness in the reactive, fear in the perfectionist.
- **Excluded parts of the self:** the child you were, the beginner you were, the one who once failed.

6.2 What is inherited

Behind every feared scene, there are often loyalties and identifications that were not chosen but received. You may fear doing to a participant what someone once did to you. Or, more subtly, what someone you love once suffered — and you, without knowing, are on the side of the one who caused it.

- **Loyalties:** being like the parent you loved, repeating what they did because loving them means not separating. Being unlike the parent you rejected, but in such a reactive way that you are still organised by them.
- **Introjects, in Gestalt language:** the voice of the first teacher you had that still runs through your mind telling you what a trainer should and should not do, decades after you stopped agreeing with them.

6.3 What was decided

Long before you became a professional, the child you were made decisions about how to be in the world. Silent oaths, never voiced, never revisited, but still organising your practice today.

- « I will never be like that teacher who humiliated me in public. »
- « I will always make sure no child feels what I felt in that classroom. »
- « If someone cries in front of me, I must make it stop. »
- « If I am not liked by the group, I have failed. »

These oaths are not wrong — they often express genuine values — but they organise your professional behaviour rigidly, unconsciously, and without your permission. A feared scene is very often an oath under threat.

« The feared scene is not new. It is a loyalty in action. »

7. The role of the group during the work

When one person works their feared scene in the group, the others are not an audience. They are not passive witnesses. They participate in the work in three distinct ways, and understanding these ways changes how the group behaves and how much learning it extracts.

The group as resonator

What the protagonist is working touches everyone, because feared scenes are not idiosyncratic — they are human. The participant who is watching a scene about being rejected by the group is, in their own body, feeling their own rejections. This resonance is not a distraction; it is information. Each group member, by staying with what the protagonist's work produces in them, learns about themselves.

The group as field amplifier

In systemic work, the representatives chosen by the protagonist do not just « act » a role — they receive real information from the field and report it. A group member placed in the role of « the fearful participant » will report sensations, emotions, impulses, that they did not invent. The group is the instrument through which the invisible becomes visible.

The group as carrier of the protagonist's disowned parts

And finally, this is clinically crucial: what annoys you about the group is usually a part of you that you have put outside yourself. The participant you find insufferable is often carrying something of yours you cannot carry. The voice in the group that most grates on you is frequently the voice you silenced inside. This has direct implications for trainers — your feared scenes are not about those external figures, they are about the parts of yourself those figures represent.

« What disturbs you in the group is often a part of you that is outside yourself. »

8. After the scene — integration

A well-worked feared scene does not disappear. You will still fear it in some form — because implication remains. But the fear changes quality: from

paralysing to informative, from an enemy to a signal, from something that controls you to something you can notice and choose how to meet.

Integration is not the same as understanding. You can understand everything about a scene and still repeat it. Integration is something else:

- **Occupying a different place.** Literally, in the body. Standing where you had never stood. Breathing where you had always held your breath.
- **Being able to choose a response.** Not because the automatism has gone, but because you now have at least a half-second between the activation and the response. In that half-second, a choice becomes possible.
- **Tolerating activation without collapsing.** The nervous system holds what it could not hold before. The scene arrives, the body activates, and you stay present with it. That is the trainable skill.

A closing proposal

At the end of the work — whether Moreno or Hellinger — the facilitator may invite you to find a body image or an anchor phrase that captures what you discovered. Not a concept. A posture, a gesture, a sentence you can return to when the scene approaches you again in real life.

Examples of anchor phrases:

- « I do not have to hold this alone. »
- « This is not my child. »
- « I am allowed to not know. »
- « I am the trainer. I am not my father. »

A good anchor phrase is short, specific, and bodily true. It is the trace of the work you carry back into your life.

9. Indicators that the scene has been well worked

How do you know the work has landed? Not by whether you feel euphoric, or whether something dramatic happened, or whether everyone in the group applauded. The real indicators are subtler, and they are the ones to look for.

- **The urgency decreases.** The scene that felt life-or-death loses some of that weight. You still care — but the care has stopped being panic.

- **Your capacity to look at it grows.** Before the work, thinking about the scene made you avert your gaze. After, you can hold the image longer, in more detail, with less flinching.
- **A new response appears — even a small one.** You do not have to become a different trainer. But something that was not available before becomes available. A breath where there was holding. A word where there was silence. A boundary where there was merging.
- **The body regulates.** The signs are often simple: better sleep the night after, digestion that returns, shoulders that lower. The nervous system registers that something has shifted, even if the mind has not yet caught up.

10. A closing word

Feared scenes are not obstacles in your professional development. They are, if you meet them well, the most precise instruments of professional development you have. They show you, with surgical accuracy, where your character still governs where your adult responsibility should govern. Where a loyalty is making decisions you did not consciously authorise. Where a child you once were is still trying to do the trainer's job.

Working a feared scene in the group is not a performance. It is an act of intimacy — with yourself, with the participants who will meet you changed, and with the field that shapes all of us whether we name it or not. The courage to bring your scene to the work is, itself, part of the work.

« The feared scene does not measure your technical capacity. It reveals your deep structure at the moment of greatest exposure. »

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Accompanied Inventory · Peer Practice Session

Working with what came up in the inventory

To be facilitated only within a training group with clinical or supervisory frame. Youth workers and educators may read this handout as orientation, not as a protocol to apply.

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How it works

You will work in pairs. Two rounds of thirty-five minutes — one as the person sharing, one as the person accompanying. After both rounds, we close in the full circle.

Bring with you the three situations you identified in your inventory. Choose one of them to bring into the session — the one that is most alive in you right now.

If you are the one accompanying

Your task is to be present. The same presence you practised in the previous peer practice session — no judgement, no advice, no interpretation.

This time, with one addition: at the end, you will offer the other person an honest reflection of what you have seen in them.

Hold three questions for them, spaced according to their rhythm. Not all at once. Let silence happen between them.

> **1.** *What is happening in your body when you bring this situation back now?*
>
> **2.** *What need of yours was alive there, underneath the automatic reaction?*

> **3.** *And what did the group (or the person in front of you) need from you in that moment, that was different from what you needed?*

These three questions are enough. You do not need to add anything else. If your partner falls into silence, stay with them. The silence is part of the work.

At the end — your honest reflection

In the last ten minutes of your round, give your partner two short sentences. Just two.

> ***« One gift I have seen in you as a professional during this conversation is… »***
>
> ***« One professional movement I have seen you avoid in this conversation, that I think your work would benefit from approaching, is… »***

Base your sentences on something you actually observed: a posture, a breath, a softening, a tension, a tone of voice. Not on what you think about people in general. Not on a theory. Only on what you saw, here, with this person.

« If you are not sure what to say, say less. The honest reflection is not the one that explains the most. It is the one that has been most clearly seen. »

If you are the one sharing

Bring one situation. Speak from your own experience. Take your time.

When your partner offers you the two sentences at the end, do not respond. Do not discuss, do not correct, do not thank yet. Just receive. Breathe. Let the words land in your body.

You will have time to reflect on them later, in silence and in the closing circle.

> **▶ If something escalates.**
>
> If at any point during the pair work one of the five pocket-card signals appears in your partner — acute risk of harm, loss of contact with reality, disclosure of current abuse, severe substance impairment, or sustained dysregulation that does not settle — stop the dispositive immediately. Stay with your partner, lower the intensity, and call a facilitator into the room. The pocket card is reproduced in Part VII; read it before the session, not during it.

Closing in the full circle

After both rounds, we come back together. Each person will share, in one minute, only this:

« One thing I am taking with me from what my partner reflected back to me. »

You do not need to repeat the exact words you received. You do not need to share the situation you brought. Only what you are taking with you.

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— End of notes —

EMPATHYE · Long Training Course 2026

Quick Guide to Gestalt Theatre

An introduction for youth workers, trainers, and educators

By Diego Marín

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How to use this guide

This guide is your companion during the EMPATHYE training and beyond. Read it to understand the foundations, refer to it when you need clarity, and let it inspire your practice.

« Gestalt Theatre is not learned through reading alone. It is discovered through doing. Keep this close — but remember: the real learning happens when you step into the experience. When your body moves, when your voice trembles, when you surprise yourself with what emerges. »

Introduction — welcome to the journey

If you have picked up this guide, you are probably curious. Maybe you have heard about Gestalt Theatre and wonder what it really means. Maybe you are here for a training course and want to know what to expect. Or perhaps you are simply drawn to the idea that theatre and personal growth can dance together.

Whatever brought you here, welcome. You are about to discover a methodology that weaves together the expressive power of theatre with the awareness practices of Gestalt therapy. It is a space where improvisation becomes a mirror, where characters reveal hidden parts of

ourselves, and where the present moment — the here and now — becomes the stage for transformation.

What is Gestalt Theatre?

Imagine standing in a room with others, not quite sure what will happen next. Someone offers you a gesture, a word, an invitation. You respond — not from a script, but from something alive inside you. In that exchange, something shifts. You notice a tension in your chest you had not felt before. A thought surfaces that surprises you. The other person's eyes tell you they have felt something too.

This is Gestalt Theatre: the meeting point of two powerful traditions that, remarkably, share a revolutionary idea — what matters is not what we say, but what we actually experience.

The Theatre of Experience, developed by Constantin Stanislavski, invites actors not to pretend to feel, but to actually feel — drawing on authentic emotion and lived experience to bring truth to the stage.

Gestalt Therapy, created by Fritz Perls, emphasises present-moment awareness, personal responsibility, and the integration of all parts of ourselves. Instead of analysing the past, it asks: what are you aware of right now?

When these two come together, something unique emerges. It is not traditional theatre aiming for a polished performance. It is not clinical therapy staying in conversation. It is a third thing — an experiential space where you explore yourself through embodied action, improvisation, and creative expression.

A note on language

Throughout this guide, you will encounter terms like awareness, contact, polarities, and the here and now. Do not worry if they feel abstract at first. Each one will be unpacked with examples and practical applications. Gestalt Theatre has its own vocabulary, but it is simpler than it sounds — and more importantly, it is something you will come to understand in your body, not just your mind.

Why theatre for personal and educational work?

You might wonder: why use theatre? Why not just talk about emotions, conflicts, or challenges?

Because talking has its limits. We can spend hours discussing our fears, our patterns, our relationships — and leave the conversation unchanged. But

when we move, when we embody, when we step into a scene and let our bodies speak, something different happens.

The body does not lie. When you move, gesture, or speak as a character, your body reveals what words often hide. Tension in your shoulders, a trembling voice, an impulse to turn away — these are truths that emerge without thinking.

Playing roles creates safe distance. You can explore difficult emotions or situations through a character, which gives you just enough space to look without being overwhelmed. It is like watching yourself from a slight remove — close enough to feel, far enough to bear.

Theatre is experiential learning. You do not read about empathy or conflict resolution — you live it. You step into someone else's shoes, you improvise solutions, you feel what it is like to be brave, vulnerable, or fierce.

And yes — it is fun. Let us not forget this. Gestalt Theatre invites play, spontaneity, and creativity. Learning through joy sticks deeper than learning through lectures. When we laugh together, risk together, create together — those experiences leave traces that no textbook can match.

What makes Gestalt Theatre different?

Gestalt Theatre is not drama therapy, psychodrama, or traditional acting training. It occupies its own unique space.

It is not about performance. There is no audience to impress, no script to memorise. The focus is entirely on your experience in the moment, not on producing something beautiful or correct.

It is rooted in the present. The here and now is everything. We are not analysing your childhood or planning your future. We are exploring what is alive right now — in your body, your breath, your relationship with the person standing before you.

It is integrative. It does not separate mind, body, and emotion. You think with your body, feel with your voice, and embody your thoughts. Everything is connected.

It is group-based. While individual exploration happens, the group is essential. You learn from witnessing others, from being witnessed, and from the resonance that emerges when people explore together.

Part 1

Foundations

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The meeting of two traditions

Gestalt Theatre did not appear out of nowhere. It stands on the shoulders of two giants who, remarkably, never met but shared a revolutionary insight: what matters is not what we say, but what we actually experience.

Constantin Stanislavski and the Theatre of Experience

In the early twentieth century, Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski grew frustrated with actors who merely posed and declaimed. He wanted truth on stage — not the appearance of emotion, but emotion itself.

So he developed a method where actors would draw on their own memories, emotions, and sensations to create authentic performances. Instead of « acting sad », an actor would recall a moment of genuine loss and let that feeling inform the character. Instead of pretending, they would actually feel.

This became known as the Theatre of Experience — and it changed acting forever.

Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

Around the same time, in Germany and later in the United States, Fritz Perls — along with his wife Laura and writer Paul Goodman — was reimagining therapy. Instead of lying on a couch analysing the past, Perls invited people to stay in the present moment.

He emphasised awareness — noticing what you feel, think, and sense right now. He introduced concepts like contact (how we meet the world) and polarities (the opposites within us). Gestalt therapy became a philosophy of life: be here, be aware, take responsibility for your experience.

The natural fusion

Though Stanislavski and Perls never crossed paths, their work was strikingly parallel. Both believed the present moment is where

transformation happens. Both trusted authentic experience over intellectual analysis. Both understood that body, emotions, and thoughts are inseparable.

Gestalt Theatre weaves these two threads together. It uses theatrical techniques to explore psychological and emotional territory, and it uses Gestalt principles to deepen the theatrical work. Theatre becomes therapy; therapy becomes theatre. The stage becomes a laboratory for life.

> ✦ **Key principle**
>
> *In Gestalt Theatre, we do not act to entertain — we act to discover. The improvisation is the process, not the product.*

Core principles of Gestalt therapy

Before diving into theatrical techniques, let us ground ourselves in the Gestalt principles that shape this work. Even if you have little background in therapy, these ideas will become second nature as you practise.

The here and now

Gestalt therapy invites us to live in the present. Not to dwell on past regrets or future anxieties, but to be fully here, now. This is not just philosophy — it is a practice, a discipline, a way of returning again and again to what is actually happening.

In Gestalt Theatre, this means: when you improvise, you respond to what is actually happening, not to a script or a plan. When an emotion arises, you do not analyse why — you simply notice it and let it inform the scene. The facilitator does not ask « Why did you do that? » but « What are you aware of right now? »

Awareness

Awareness is the cornerstone of Gestalt — the simple, radical act of paying attention. To your body. To your emotions. To your thoughts. To your surroundings.

In theatre, awareness becomes noticing the tension in your jaw when you play a certain character, recognising the impulse to avoid eye contact with your scene partner, being conscious of the story you are telling yourself about what should happen next.

« Awareness is not about fixing or changing. It is about seeing clearly. Once you see, change can happen naturally. »

Contact and withdrawal

Gestalt therapy speaks of contact — the point where we meet the world, other people, and ourselves. Healthy living involves both engaging fully (contact) and withdrawing to rest and integrate (withdrawal).

In Gestalt Theatre, contact happens when you truly listen to your scene partner, when you let their energy affect you. Withdrawal happens in the reflection phase, when you step back and make sense of what emerged.

Many people get stuck in one mode — always engaging without rest, or always withdrawing to avoid vulnerability. Theatre helps us practise both, finding our natural rhythm.

Polarities — embracing opposites

We all contain contradictions. Strength and vulnerability. Anger and tenderness. Independence and neediness. Gestalt therapy calls these polarities.

Often, we identify with one pole and reject the other. « I am the strong one — never weak. » « I am the calm one — never angry. » But the rejected side does not disappear. It goes underground, sometimes sabotaging us from the shadows.

Health lies in integration — acknowledging both sides, making peace with our wholeness. In Gestalt Theatre, you might play a character who embodies your disowned pole, or improvise a dialogue between two inner voices. Through this exploration, what was rejected can be reclaimed.

The cycle of experience

Gestalt therapy describes how we move through needs and desires in a natural cycle: first, sensation stirs inside you (hunger, sadness, curiosity). Then comes awareness — you recognise the need. Energy gathers to take action (mobilisation). You act to meet the need. The need is satisfied (contact). Finally, you rest, integrate, and return to balance (withdrawal).

This cycle can get interrupted at any stage. Maybe you do not notice the sensation. Maybe you are aware but do not mobilise energy. Maybe you act but never reach contact.

In Gestalt Theatre, improvisations can reveal where you get stuck. If you start a scene but never complete it, that is information. If you rush to action without feeling the need first, that is also information. The stage becomes a mirror for your patterns.

Part 2

The Facilitator's Attitude

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If you are reading this guide because you will be facilitating Gestalt Theatre — whether in classrooms, workshops, or community settings — this section is for you. The facilitator's role is unique. You are not a traditional theatre director seeking a polished show. You are not a therapist interpreting unconscious material. You are something in between: a holder of space, a witness, a guide.

Presence and grounding

The most important thing you bring to the room is your presence. Not your knowledge, not your experience — your ability to be here, fully, with whatever arises.

Presence means your attention is on the group, not on your phone, your inner worries, or your next clever intervention. You are sensing the room — the energy, the silences, the unspoken tensions.

Grounding means you are anchored in your own body. When intensity arises, you do not panic. You breathe. You stay steady.

« If you are scattered or anxious, the group will feel it. Your nervous system speaks to theirs. So before each session, take a moment. Feel your feet on the ground. Breathe. Arrive. »

The Gestalt attitude in action

Facilitating Gestalt Theatre requires a specific attitude — one that might feel counter-intuitive at first.

Non-judgement — welcoming what emerges

Whatever shows up in a scene — anger, fear, silliness, awkwardness — gets welcomed. You do not label it good or bad. You do not try to fix it. You simply acknowledge: « This is what is here. »

This does not mean passivity. If someone's behaviour harms another participant, you intervene. But you do so from care, not judgement.

Curiosity over control

A Gestalt facilitator does not have an agenda for what should happen. You are curious: « What will emerge if we try this? » You trust the process more than your plan.

This can be uncomfortable if you are used to leading with certainty. But Gestalt Theatre thrives on not-knowing. The best moments often surprise everyone — including you.

Trusting the process

Sometimes an improvisation will feel stuck, repetitive, or pointless. Resist the urge to rush in and « save » it. Stay with the discomfort a moment longer. Often, breakthrough comes right after confusion.

Your job is not to make everything smooth. It is to hold space for whatever needs to unfold.

Holding space without fixing

When someone cries, or gets angry, or freezes in fear, your instinct might be to comfort, reassure, or problem-solve. Pause. Ask yourself: is this person actually in danger, or am I uncomfortable with their discomfort?

Holding space means: I see you. I am here. I trust you can move through this. You do not rescue. You accompany.

> ✦ **Key principle**
>
> *You are not responsible for solving people's lives. You are responsible for creating a safe container where they can explore and discover for themselves.*

Ethics and boundaries

This is where theory meets real-world complexity. Gestalt Theatre touches deep places. People might cry, get angry, or reveal vulnerable parts of themselves. As a facilitator, you carry responsibility.

Where does the game end and therapy begin?

Gestalt Theatre is not psychotherapy. You are not a therapist (unless you are, in which case you already know this distinction). Here is the line:

Gestalt Theatre explores through improvisation, character, and creative expression. The focus is on awareness and experiential learning, not clinical diagnosis or treatment.

Therapy requires professional training, ethical oversight, and ongoing support for individuals with serious psychological issues.

If someone in your workshop shows signs of trauma, psychosis, or self-harm, you refer them to professional help. You do not attempt to « heal » them through theatre.

Safety first — emotional and physical

Safety is not about avoiding discomfort — growth requires risk. But safety means clear agreements where everyone knows the rules: confidentiality, no physical harm, respect for boundaries. It means anyone can say « stop » or « I need a break » without explanation or judgement. And it means no coercion — people choose their level of participation, and no one is forced to do something that feels unsafe.

Physical safety is obvious: no hitting, no dangerous stunts. Emotional safety is subtler: we do not mock, ridicule, or use someone's personal story without permission.

When to step in, when to step back

Knowing when to intervene is an art.

Step in when someone's physical or emotional safety is at risk, when the scene has become repetitive and no one knows how to move forward, or when someone is dissociating or overwhelmed (glazed eyes, frozen, disconnected).

Step back when the discomfort is productive — when people are wrestling with something real and intervening would interrupt their process — or when the group has the resources to navigate the moment themselves.

Confidentiality and respect

What happens in the room stays in the room. This is non-negotiable. Participants need to know their stories will not become gossip.

At the start of your work together, establish this clearly: « Everything shared here is confidential. We do not talk about others' experiences outside this space. »

Part 3

The Heart of the Work

Improvisation principles

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Improvisation is the engine of Gestalt Theatre. It is where awareness becomes action, where theory becomes embodied experience. But improvisation in Gestalt Theatre is not random chaos. It has principles — ways of being that make the work both free and grounded.

« Yes, and… » as a life philosophy

Acceptance + contribution

If there is one phrase that captures the spirit of improvisation, it is « Yes, and… »

In improvisation, when your partner offers something — a gesture, a line, an emotion — you say yes to it. You accept it as reality. Then you add something (« and… ») to build on it.

Your partner says: « Look at this treasure we found! » You do not reply: « That is not a treasure, it is just a rock. » (That is a no.) You say: « Yes! And it is glowing! » Now you are co-creating.

Why « Yes, but… » kills connection

« Yes, but… » is the enemy of improvisation. It blocks, deflects, or negates the other person's offer. In theatre, it kills the scene. In life, it kills collaboration, intimacy, and possibility.

Gestalt Theatre trains you to notice when you are saying « but. » When you feel resistance. When you are defending instead of receiving. That awareness is the first step toward change.

> ✦ **Practice exercise**
>
> *Try this today: in a conversation, notice how often you say « but. » What happens if you replace it with « and »? « I hear you, and here is what I am noticing… »*

Active listening and availability

Listening with your whole body

In Gestalt Theatre, listening is not just about hearing words. It is about sensing energy, noticing body language, feeling what is unsaid.

When you improvise, you listen with your ears (what are they actually saying?), your eyes (what is their posture, their gaze?), your body (what sensations arise in you as you witness them?), and your intuition (what do you sense is really happening?).

Being available to what your partner offers

Availability means you are open. You are not clinging to your plan for the scene. You are not waiting for your turn to talk. You are genuinely curious about what they will do next.

This is vulnerable. It means you might be surprised. You might not know what to do. And that is exactly the point.

The art of not planning ahead

Beginners often improvise from their heads. They think: « I will say this next, then we will do that, and it will be clever. » Meanwhile, they miss everything happening right now.

Gestalt Theatre invites you to let go of the script in your mind. Trust that the next moment will arrive. Trust that you and your partner, together, will find the way.

Mistakes as opportunities

There are no mistakes — only unexpected gifts

In traditional theatre, forgetting a line is a mistake. In Gestalt Theatre, it is information. Maybe you forgot because the line did not feel true. Maybe your body knew something your mind did not.

Someone trips? Incorporate it into the scene. Someone laughs at the wrong moment? Let it become part of the story. Imperfection is welcome here.

Letting go of perfection

Perfectionism is the enemy of authenticity. If you are trying to do it right, you are performing for an imaginary audience. You are not present.

« Gestalt Theatre says: let it be messy. Let it be awkward. Let it be real. »

Co-creation and trust

Building something together

Improvisation is never a solo act, even when you are alone on stage. You are always in relationship — with the space, with the group witnessing you, with your own inner voices.

When you improvise with a partner, you are weaving a shared story. Neither of you controls it. Both of you shape it. This is co-creation.

The magic of « not knowing »

There is a moment in every improvisation where you have no idea what comes next. That moment is gold. It is the edge. It is where something new can be born.

Instead of panicking, breathe. Stay in your body. Wait. The next move will arrive.

Safety in play

Clear agreements before starting

Before any improvisation begins, the group needs to know the rules:

- No physical violence — you can play conflict, anger, or threat, but no actual hitting, pushing, or harming.
- No sexual acts — sensuality and desire can be explored, but no explicit sexual content.
- Respect for personal boundaries.
- Confidentiality — what is said or done stays in the room.

The right to say « stop »

Anyone — actor or witness — can call « stop » or « pause » at any time. No explanation needed. This is sacred.

The facilitator models this by sometimes pausing a scene to check in: « How are you? Do you want to continue? »

Respecting limits

Limits are not failures. They are information. If you do not want to do something, that is valid. If someone else does not want to, respect it completely.

Over time, you might expand your limits. But that happens organically, not through force.

Part 4

Key Gestalt Concepts on Stage

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Now that we have explored the principles of improvisation, let us see how specific Gestalt concepts come alive in theatrical practice. These are not abstract theories — they are tools you can use to deepen awareness and unlock new possibilities.

Awareness — the foundation

What am I noticing right now?

Awareness begins with a simple question: « What am I noticing? »

In a scene, this might be: « I notice my breathing is shallow. » « I notice I am avoiding eye contact. » « I notice a lump in my throat. » « I notice a thought: I am doing this wrong. »

You do not judge or analyse. You just notice. That simple act of noticing shifts something. It brings consciousness to what was unconscious.

The scene as a magnifying glass

Improvisation amplifies patterns. If you tend to people-please in life, you will probably do it in a scene. If you control situations, that will show up. If you disappear when conflict arises, you will see it on stage.

« The scene becomes a mirror. And once you see the pattern clearly, you can choose differently. »

Contact and withdrawal — the rhythm of relationship

Meeting and separating

Healthy relationships involve both contact (engaging, connecting) and withdrawal (resting, integrating). Too much contact burns you out. Too much withdrawal isolates you.

In improvisation, you practise this rhythm. Contact: you meet your scene partner's eyes, you respond to their energy, you let yourself be affected. Withdrawal: the scene ends, you step back, you reflect without needing to dissect immediately.

Playing with distance and closeness

Physical distance mirrors emotional distance. In a scene, try this: move closer to your partner. What changes? Move further away. What changes?

Distance is not bad, and closeness is not always good. Both are valid. The question is: are you choosing consciously, or reacting habitually?

Polarities — exploring opposites

We all contain contradictions

You are strong and fragile. Confident and insecure. Generous and selfish. Joyful and sad. We all are.

The problem arises when we identify with only one side and reject the other. « I am the strong one — I am never weak. » But the disowned side does not disappear. It goes underground and often sabotages us.

Playing the opposite

Gestalt Theatre invites you to play with opposites. If you are usually gentle, try playing someone aggressive. If you are usually loud, try playing someone silent.

This is not about becoming that opposite. It is about discovering: « Oh — this part exists in me too. I do not have to be afraid of it. »

Integration, not elimination

The goal is not to get rid of parts of yourself. It is to integrate them. To say: « I contain both strength and vulnerability, and I can access either when the situation calls for it. »

« Integration brings wholeness. And wholeness brings freedom. »

Projection and identification

What I see in others might be mine

Projection is when we see in others what we cannot see (or will not accept) in ourselves. « That person is so selfish! » might actually mean: « I have unmet needs I am not honouring. »

In Gestalt Theatre, when you play a character you judge harshly, you often discover: « Oh — I understand them. There is a part of me that is like this too. »

Characters as mirrors

Every character you create contains a piece of you. Even if the character is fictional, the impulses, emotions, and thoughts come from your own experience.

So when you improvise a tyrant, a victim, a rebel, a caregiver — you are exploring different aspects of your psyche. The stage becomes an internal laboratory.

The empty chair as dialogue

One of Gestalt therapy's most famous techniques is the empty chair: you place an empty chair in front of you and imagine someone (or some part of yourself) sitting there. Then you speak to them.

In Gestalt Theatre, this becomes theatrical. You can have a dialogue between two parts of yourself — the part that wants to quit your job and the part that is afraid to take risks. You physically move between chairs, embodying each voice.

What emerges is often surprising. The voices talk, argue, negotiate. And eventually, they might find a way forward.

Body as territory

The body holds what words cannot say

Your body remembers everything — joy, trauma, longing, fear. Sometimes, words cannot access those memories. But movement can.

In Gestalt Theatre, we trust the body's wisdom. If your hand clenches into a fist, that is not random. If your shoulders collapse, there is a story there.

Gestures, posture, movement as language

A slumped posture might say: « I am carrying too much. » A rigid spine might say: « I cannot let my guard down. » Rapid hand movements might express: « I am anxious, I need to control. »

In a session, the facilitator might invite: « Exaggerate that gesture. What does it want to say? » And suddenly, the body speaks.

Trusting physical impulses

An impulse arises: you want to reach out, or pull back, or collapse to the floor. In everyday life, you suppress it. In Gestalt Theatre, you follow it.

Not every impulse needs to be acted on in life. But in the safe container of theatre, you can explore: what happens if I follow this? Where does it lead?

Part 5

Practical Tools and Techniques

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Theory is beautiful, but practice is where transformation happens. In this section, we will explore specific techniques you will encounter in Gestalt Theatre — some borrowed from Gestalt therapy, some from theatrical improvisation, all adapted to this unique space where the two meet.

Working with the empty chair

The empty chair is one of the most iconic tools from Gestalt therapy, and in Gestalt Theatre, it becomes powerfully theatrical.

Setting up the scene

You place an empty chair facing you. The facilitator asks: « Who or what do you want to place in this chair? »

It might be a person (parent, partner, friend, boss), a part of yourself (your inner critic, your frightened child, your wise self), an emotion (your anger, your grief), or a symbol (your fear of failure, your longing for freedom).

Inviting dialogue

Once you have placed someone or something in the chair, you speak to it. Then — and this is key — you switch chairs and become that voice. You respond.

This is not about logic. It is about letting each voice speak fully. You might be surprised by what emerges.

Closing and integrating

After the dialogue, the facilitator helps you reflect: what did you notice? What did each voice need? Is there anything left unsaid?

Sometimes resolution comes. Sometimes it does not. Both are valid. The goal is not to fix everything — it is to bring awareness.

Masks and archetypes

The mask liberates — hiding to reveal

It sounds paradoxical, but putting on a mask often helps you reveal more, not less. The mask gives you permission to explore aspects of yourself you usually hide.

A neutral mask strips away your familiar expressions, forcing you to communicate with your whole body. A character mask (angry, joyful, mischievous) invites you to embody that energy fully.

Working with symbolic figures

Archetypes — universal characters like the Hero, the Caregiver, the Rebel, the Sage — live in all of us. Gestalt Theatre uses these as doorways.

You might be asked: « Create a character who represents your shadow — the part you most reject. » Or: « Play your wise elder self, who has lived through this struggle. »

« Archetypes are not clichés. When embodied authentically, they become deeply personal. »

Objects and symbols in scene

An object is never just an object

A scarf can become a rope that binds you. A stone can become your burden. A feather can become your lightness.

In Gestalt Theatre, objects are symbolic. They hold meaning beyond their physical form.

Metaphors made tangible

Instead of talking about feeling weighed down, you pick up a heavy object and carry it around the room. Instead of saying « I feel trapped, » you improvise being in a shrinking box.

Metaphor becomes embodied. And embodied metaphor is powerful.

Let the object speak

Sometimes the facilitator will ask: « If this object could speak, what would it say? »

You become the object's voice. And often, the object says things you could not say as yourself.

The group as witness

The power of being seen

When you improvise, the group watches. This is not passive observation — it is active witnessing. The group holds space for your process.

« Being witnessed can be terrifying and healing. To be seen in your vulnerability, your rage, your joy — and to not be judged — is rare. It teaches you that you are not alone. »

Mirroring and resonance

Often, what happens in your scene will resonate with someone watching. They see themselves in you. Your courage gives them courage.

This is the magic of group work. We learn not only from our own explorations, but from witnessing others'.

The chorus as collective support

Sometimes the group becomes a chorus — speaking together, moving together, amplifying a voice or emotion. This collective energy can be incredibly supportive, especially when someone is working through something difficult.

The message is: you are not carrying this alone. We are here with you.

Part 6

From Scene to Life

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Gestalt Theatre does not end when the scene ends. The insights you gain on stage are meant to travel with you — into your relationships, your work, your daily life. But this transfer does not happen automatically. It requires intention and integration.

Closing a Gestalt Theatre session

Bringing the experience back to the body

After an intense improvisation, people can feel scattered or disoriented. The facilitator helps ground them: « Feel your feet on the floor. » « Take three deep breaths. » « Look around the room. Notice where you are. »

This is not just calming — it is a return to the present, to safety, to the here and now.

Naming what emerged

After a scene, the facilitator might ask: « What are you aware of now? »

The participant responds briefly. They do not analyse or justify. They simply name: « I notice sadness. » « I feel lighter. » « I am confused. »

« Resist the urge to explain everything. Let the experience remain somewhat mysterious. The unconscious needs time to digest. »

Leaving space for the process to continue

Growth does not happen all at once. The scene plants a seed. That seed might sprout days, weeks, even months later.

The facilitator honours this by not demanding resolution. They trust that the process continues beyond the session.

Integration — what do I take with me?

Questions for reflection

After a session, reflect on these questions — you can journal, talk with a friend, or just sit quietly:

- What surprised me today?
- What pattern did I notice in myself?
- What felt familiar? What felt new?
- If this scene were a metaphor for my life, what would it be saying?
- What small action could I take based on what I discovered?

How the scene connects to real life

The magic happens when you see the link between the scene and your actual life. Maybe you played someone passive, and you realise: « Oh — I do that at work. I do not speak up. »

Or you played someone angry, and you think: « I did not know I had that much rage in me. Maybe I need to address this. »

« The scene is not « just theatre. » It is a window into your inner world. »

Small actions, big shifts

Transformation does not require dramatic gestures. Sometimes, a tiny shift — making eye contact, setting a boundary, asking for what you need — changes everything.

After a Gestalt Theatre session, commit to one small action. Not because you should, but because you are curious: what happens if I try this differently?

Closing

The Invitation to Keep Exploring

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You have reached the end of this guide, but the real journey is just beginning.

Gestalt Theatre is not something you master by reading. It is something you discover by doing — by stepping into the unknown, by playing with possibilities, by allowing yourself to be surprised.

This methodology does not promise to fix you or solve all your problems. It offers something subtler and more profound: a way to be more fully yourself. To notice what you usually ignore. To express what you usually suppress. To integrate what you have rejected.

In your work as youth workers, trainers, and educators, Gestalt Theatre gives you a tool that goes beyond curriculum and lesson plans. It invites the people you work with — and yourself — into genuine presence, authentic connection, and creative exploration.

A few words of encouragement

- **You do not need to be perfect.** Fumbling, awkwardness, and uncertainty are part of the process.
- **Trust the group.** The collective intelligence of people exploring together is wiser than any individual facilitator.
- **Stay curious.** Every session will teach you something new — about your participants and about yourself.
- **Honour resistance.** When someone (including you) resists, that is information. Meet it with curiosity, not force.
- **Celebrate small moments.** A single insight, a laugh, a tear, a brave choice — these matter more than you think.

The invitation

Gestalt Theatre is an invitation to live more fully — on stage and off. To bring awareness to your patterns. To reclaim disowned parts of yourself. To connect authentically with others. To play, risk, and grow.

So take what you have learned here and bring it into your practice. Try things. Make mistakes. Discover what works for you and your groups. And remember: the best teaching comes not from having all the answers, but from being willing to explore the questions together.

« The stage is waiting. The group is gathering. The moment is now. Welcome to Gestalt Theatre. »

∞

Suggested readings and resources

If this guide has sparked your curiosity and you want to go deeper, here are some foundational texts and resources.

Gestalt therapy

Perls, F., Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P. (1951). Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality.

The foundational text of Gestalt therapy.

Perls, F. (1969). Gestalt Therapy Verbatim.

A collection of lectures and demonstrations by Fritz Perls.

Polster, E. & Polster, M. (1973). Gestalt Therapy Integrated.

A comprehensive guide to Gestalt theory and practice.

Theatre and improvisation

Stanislavski, K. (1936). An Actor Prepares.

The classic text on the Theatre of Experience.

Spolin, V. (1963). Improvisation for the Theater.

Foundational improvisation exercises.

Johnstone, K. (1979). Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre.

Essential reading on spontaneity and creativity.

Brook, P. (1968). The Empty Space.

A meditation on what makes theatre alive.

Gestalt Theatre and related approaches

Boal, A. (1974). Theatre of the Oppressed.

Explores theatre as a tool for social change and personal liberation.

Jones, P. (1996). Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living.

Connects dramatic work with therapeutic practice.

Online resources

European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) — www.eagt.org

International Gestalt Therapy Association

Escuela de Teatro Gestalt de Murcia — for training programmes and workshops.

« This guide is a beginning, not an end. Gestalt Theatre is a living practice that evolves with each group, each session, each person. Use these principles as a foundation, but do not be bound by them. Trust your intuition, honour your participants, and let the work unfold organically. »

May your explorations be rich and transformative.

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— End of guide —

PART

V

Bridges to Youth Work

From the therapy room into daily practice with young people

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3
Practical Applications

Bringing the Gestalt attitude into youth work

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« Theory becomes meaningful only when it takes form in daily practice. »

Everything in the previous chapters — the cycle of need, polarities, body awareness, the mechanisms of disconnection — these are not concepts to apply. They are lived experiences that change how you work, once you stop trying to apply them and start letting them inform you.

What makes this approach different from most methodologies you may have learned is the focus on process rather than performance. We are not teaching you how to control groups more efficiently. We are inviting you to become aware of what is actually happening — inside you, between participants, within the group as a whole. Gestalt trusts that awareness itself is transformative. When something is truly seen and accepted, it begins to change.

The chapter that follows is the bridge between everything you have read so far and the concrete reality of your Monday morning. It is not exhaustive. The handouts that come after this chapter, throughout this Part of the booklet, go into the specific tools, exercises and activities. What follows here is the framework that holds them together.

3.1 Tools for group facilitation

Working with the group as a living organism

Gestalt group facilitation starts from a simple principle: the group is a living organism. Its moods, its silences, its small resistances — these are

not problems to manage. They are the field of experience the group is actually working with, even when nobody is naming it.

Your task as facilitator is not to impose structure. It is to support awareness within that field. In practical terms, this means slowing down enough to notice what is unfolding. Instead of rushing past a moment of tension, you might name it: “I am sensing some discomfort in the room right now. Is anyone aware of what that might be about?”

This act of bringing the implicit into awareness already begins a process of transformation. You have not solved the discomfort. You have simply made it part of the conversation. Often that is enough.

Reading the body of the group

Pay attention to non-verbal communication — posture, breathing, facial expression, the geography of who sits where. The body of the group speaks before the words do. A useful gentle intervention is to name what you observe, without interpretation:

- “I notice you are leaning back in your chair. What are you aware of right now?”
- “There has been silence for a while. What is alive in this silence?”
- “Your voice got very quiet when you said that. What happened?”

Over time, this kind of attention nurtures a group climate where participants feel safe to express what is real for them — not what they think they should say. That is the climate in which the deeper work becomes possible.

3.2 Working with conflict and crisis

When the temperature rises in the room

Sooner or later, something in the group will heat up. Two participants will clash. A young person will say something hard. A silence will become heavy in a way that suggests something is about to break. These are not failures of facilitation. They are openings.

The reflex of most facilitators is to lower the temperature as fast as possible — to mediate, to redirect, to suggest a break. Sometimes this is the right move. But often it is a missed opportunity. Conflict in a group, when held with awareness, reveals the field. The energy that was scattered becomes visible. What was being avoided becomes nameable.

First, regulate yourself

When the temperature rises, the first thing you need to do is not act. It is to notice what is happening in your own body. Your heart rate, your breath, the impulse to fix or to escape. If you intervene from your own activation, you will amplify what is already loud. If you pause for one or two breaths and find your ground, you give the room a different quality of attention to settle into.

Your nervous system is the first instrument of the group. Whatever state you bring will, sooner or later, register in everyone else. This is not a metaphor — it is what bodies do in a shared space. Your regulated presence is not a passive ingredient; it is one of the most active interventions you make.

Then, name what you see

Once you are grounded, you can speak. The form of the intervention matters less than its honesty. You are not solving the conflict. You are making it visible to the group as something they are sharing, not something happening despite them.

> *« Naming a tension does not increase it. It transfers it from the body of the group into the awareness of the group. »*

When it goes beyond your role

There are moments when what surfaces is not for the group, and not for you in your facilitator role. A young person discloses something serious. Someone freezes in a way that signals trauma response. An old wound opens in front of everyone. In those moments, your job is not to do therapy. It is to contain the moment, protect the person, and connect them — as soon as is appropriate — with the right professional support.

The pocket card at the end of this booklet gives you five practical signals to recognise these moments. Read it. Photocopy it. Keep it where you can find it. The line between accompanying and overstepping is not always obvious, but it exists, and your job includes knowing where it is.

3.3 Developing emotional competence and resilience

In the young people, and in yourself

Emotional competence is not a curriculum item. You cannot deliver it as a workshop, tick it off, and expect it to land. It develops in the same place all real learning develops — in lived experience, repeated, in the company of someone who is already practising it.

What you can do, in your role, is create the conditions in which it grows. Three of those conditions are within reach of any well-trained youth worker.

First — model what you want to see

Young people learn emotional regulation by watching adults regulate. They learn to name feelings by hearing adults name theirs. They learn that mistakes do not destroy a relationship by seeing adults repair the relationship after a mistake. None of this is taught with a flipchart. It is taught with your nervous system and your willingness to be visible as a feeling person.

Second — make space for what is unspoken

Most young people you work with carry more than they say. The framework of the session, the time available, the expectations of the institution — all of these tend to push the difficult material underground. Build into your sessions, even briefly, moments where the unspoken is invited. A check-in question that goes one layer deeper than “how are you.” A silence held without rushing. A closing round that asks not what they learned but what they noticed.

Third — protect your own resilience

You cannot give what you do not have. If your own emotional life is depleted, your capacity to accompany other people is depleted too. This sounds obvious; it is also one of the things youth workers are most likely to ignore. The Compass Within and the inter-module practice guidelines elsewhere in this booklet are practical structures for this. Use them. They are not optional extras. They are the maintenance schedule for the only instrument you have.

3.4 Designing Gestalt-based youth interventions

How a session unfolds when presence is the priority

Integrating Gestalt into non-formal education requires creativity and sensitivity. The goal is not to turn youth projects into therapy. It is to bring Gestalt principles — awareness, presence, contact — into educational practice.

The structure that follows is a template, not a recipe. Adapt the timing, the activity, the questions to your group, your context, your contract. What matters is the underlying movement: arrive, ground, explore, integrate.

1. Arrival and grounding · *10–15 minutes*

A few minutes of breathing, gentle movement, or a body-scan to settle into the here and now. This is not just an icebreaker — it is creating the conditions for presence. Without this phase, the rest of the session sits on top of bodies that are still elsewhere.

2. Theme introduction · *15–20 minutes*

A relevant question that invites personal reflection. “When do I feel I belong?” “What part of myself do I hide in groups?” “Where do I feel power in my life?” The question matters more than the answer. A good question opens a door; a clever one closes it.

3. Experiential activity · *45–60 minutes*

Role play, movement exploration, Gestalt Theatre exercise, group dialogue. The key is that participants experience something, not just discuss it. Discussion alone does not change the body. The body needs to do something to remember it differently.

4. Integration · *20–30 minutes*

Sharing observations and feelings. The focus is on awareness rather than evaluation. Useful questions: “What did you notice?”, “What surprised you?”, “What are you taking with you?” Avoid “What did you learn?” — it pushes participants into performance and away from experience.

Why Gestalt Theatre fits Erasmus+ contexts

Gestalt Theatre is particularly suited for European youth projects because it merges artistic expression with emotional learning. Participants can explore social themes — identity, inclusion, discrimination, belonging — while developing empathy, listening, and cooperation. The theatre frame allows what the dialogue frame would refuse, because the body is licensed to speak in a way it usually cannot.

The Quick Guide to Gestalt Theatre later in this booklet gives you a practical entry point. You do not need to be an actor, a theatre director, or a therapist to use it. You need to be willing to take small risks with your own presence first. Once you have done it from the inside, you will know how to invite others into it.

Two ways of using theatre

As with the body in chapter 2, there are two distinct sensibilities about how to use theatre in this work. They are not in opposition. They are different doorways into the same room.

Naranjo lineage	European schools
Theatre as transformative ritual. A space for catharsis, truth-telling, community healing. The performance is the event in itself, not a rehearsal for something else. *Both are valuable. One invites transformation, the other invites understanding.*	*Theatre as reflective mirror. Action and observation generate shared meaning. The performance is a way for the group to see itself, debrief, and integrate.* *Sometimes you need both, and you will learn which one a particular group is asking for.*

3.5 Continuous practice for facilitators

How presence becomes durable

Everything in this chapter assumes one thing: that you are working on yourself, continuously, in parallel with the work you do with others. This is not an extra demand. It is the foundation. Without it, the techniques of this chapter become tricks, the language becomes jargon, and the practice loses its centre.

Continuous practice does not mean more training, more workshops, more certifications. It means small, sustainable habits that keep you connected to yourself in the middle of the work. Four are particularly useful.

Body check-ins, before and after

Two minutes before a session: where are you in your body right now? What state are you arriving in? Two minutes after: what did you absorb? What is still moving in you? This sounds simple. It is. Most youth workers do not do it consistently because it sounds simple. The cumulative effect over a year of consistent practice is significant.

Journaling without analysing

Track sensations, emotions, insights after each youth session. Not to analyse them — to notice them. Three lines is enough. The act of writing it

down keeps the experience from sliding into the background, and over time you start to see your own patterns.

Peer reflection

Find one or two colleagues with whom you can share what is real, regularly. A monthly meeting, a fortnightly call, a WhatsApp group that does not let the connection dissolve. Peer reflection is not the same as supervision, but it does many of the same jobs, and it is available to anyone willing to commit to it.

Supervision when the work asks for it

There are moments — sometimes whole stretches — when peer reflection is not enough. A particular young person who keeps surfacing in your dreams. A team conflict you cannot disentangle. A burnout you can feel arriving. In those moments, paid supervision with someone trained for it is not a luxury. It is the responsible move. The references at the end of this booklet point you to where supervision is available in the European Gestalt and youth-work landscape.

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« You cannot accompany another person further »

« than you have travelled in yourself. »

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End of chapter 3. The handouts of Part V follow.

Seven Bridges

Between Gestalt therapy and youth work

How the principles of Gestalt translate into operational tools for those who work with young people

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BLOCK 1 · THE PROFESSIONAL'S PRESENCE AS THE INSTRUMENT

BRIDGE 1 · Here and Now

GESTALT

The here and now is the only place where transformation actually happens. Past and future are useful only insofar as they live in the present.

YOUTH WORK

The young person does not need you to talk about their past or plan their future. They need you to be present with them in this concrete moment. Distraction is the first form of abandonment they perceive.

BRIDGE 2 · Awareness

GESTALT

Awareness itself is healing. Seeing what is, without interpreting, is often the whole work.

YOUTH WORK

Helping the young person notice what they feel, do, or need is more powerful than giving advice. The question « what is happening to you right now? » does more work than any sermon.

BRIDGE 3 · Authentic Contact

GESTALT

YOUTH WORK

The therapeutic relationship is a real encounter between two persons — not between role and role.

Young people detect, in milliseconds, whether you are being authentic or playing the educator. The professional who allows themselves to be a person within the professional frame is the one who creates real bond.

BLOCK 2 · HOW MATERIAL MOVES IN THE GROUP

BRIDGE 4 · Figure and Ground

GESTALT

What stands out in the foreground is best understood by looking at the ground from which it emerges.

YOUTH WORK

A young person's problematic behaviour (the figure) almost always rests on an invisible ground — family, school, exclusion, unnamed grief. Intervening only on the figure leaves the cause untouched.

BRIDGE 5 · Mechanisms of Avoidance

GESTALT

Confluence, retroflection, projection, deflection, introjection. Five distinct ways the contact cycle gets interrupted before reaching the other.

YOUTH WORK

The one who melts into the group with no voice (confluence). The one who self-harms instead of expressing anger (retroflection). The one who sees aggression everywhere because it lives in them (projection). The one who scrolls when things get serious (deflection). The one who repeats adult slogans without digesting them (introjection).

BLOCK 3 · THE GROUP AS A LIVING SYSTEM

BRIDGE 6 · The Group as Organism

GESTALT

The group has its own intelligence and its own emotional field. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

YOUTH WORK

When something is off in the group, it is not always one person's fault — it is the field asking for something. Reading the field (what emotion floats in the room, what is being collectively avoided, what is unspeakable) is a directly transferable skill.

BRIDGE 7 · Polarities

GESTALT

Every human quality coexists with its opposite. Integration — not rejection of one pole — is the path of maturity.

YOUTH WORK

Adolescents live in extreme polarities (autonomy / dependence, courage / fear, desire / shame). Helping them recognise both poles in themselves — instead of identifying with only one — is crucial developmental work.

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A Day in the Life of a Youth Worker

Through Gestalt eyes — six moments

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This page summarises, at a glance, the six moments of a typical day in youth work as seen through Gestalt eyes. Each moment shows the Gestalt shift and the line between therapeutic youth work and therapy. The pages that follow develop each one in depth.

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Therapeutic youth work — facilitating moments with quality of presence, awareness, and attention to process so growth happens. Without touching the wound directly.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

Therapy (not your role) — working the personal wound. Requires training, frame, and explicit consent. When you sense it, hold the moment with care and refer to a professional.

The six moments at a glance

M1 · 08:30 · Arrival and morning circle

Gestalt shift. Read the field as people arrive. Who comes in heavy, who light, who avoids eye contact. Adjust the morning to what is actually present — not to what was planned.

Where the line is. *If a young person clearly carries something difficult from home, hold the room with care, but do not push them to share. Make space, not interrogation.*

M2 · 09:00 · Energizer / warm-up

Gestalt shift. Bodies first, words later. Choose movement that helps regulation — not just activation. Notice who cannot enter, who hides behind humour, who overdoes it.

Where the line is. *Some bodies arrive frozen for serious reasons. Do not force participation. A young person who cannot move freely today may need rest, not insistence.*

M3 · 10:00 · Activity facilitation

Gestalt shift. Bring awareness to the process, not only the content. « What is happening for you while you do this? » turns any task into a small piece of conscious work.

Where the line is. *Asking « how does this connect to your life? » is fine. Asking « what childhood memory does this bring up? » crosses into therapy. Stay with the present.*

M4 · 12:30 · The unexpected conflict

Gestalt shift. What erupts in the group is information, not interruption. Slow down. Read what the conflict is showing about the field, not only about the two visible.

Where the line is. *Mediating a disagreement is your role. Excavating the family history that fuels each side's reaction is not. Hold the surface; flag the depth for elsewhere.*

M5 · 16:00 · Debriefing and reflection

Gestalt shift. Do not ask for conclusions. Ask for noticing. « What is alive in you now? », « What surprised you? », « Where in your body did you feel something shift? »

Where the line is. *If a participant opens unprocessed material in the debrief, hold the moment with respect, close the round gently, check in privately afterwards. Do not unpack publicly.*

M6 · 20:00 · Informal moments

Gestalt shift. The corridor, the dinner table, the after-shower silence — this is where most of the work actually lands. Stay present in transitions; they are not breaks.

Where the line is. *If a young person seeks you out in informal moments to share something heavy, listen with full presence. Do not become their therapist. Listen, witness, and route to professional support if needed.*

« Gestalt is not what you do — it is how you are present while you do anything. Therapeutic youth work is not therapy: it is the quality of attention that makes ordinary moments fertile. »

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A Day in the Life of a Youth Worker

How Gestalt awareness can quietly run through every moment of your work — and where the line between therapeutic youth work and therapy lies

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« You will not be working as a Gestalt therapist. You will be working as a youth worker. But the way you arrive at your job, the way you read the room, the way you ask questions, the way you hold silence — all of that can carry a Gestalt sensibility, and the young people you accompany will feel the difference, even if they never know its name. »

Therapeutic youth work is not therapy

Before we walk through the day, we need to make a distinction that this whole document depends on. Otherwise everything we say next can be misread.

Two different territories

Doing therapy means working the personal wound of the young person — their trauma, their internal conflict, their long-standing pattern. Therapy requires specific training, an explicit therapeutic frame, and the explicit consent of the person to enter that work. It is not what a youth worker does. It is not what an educator does. It is not what a residential trainer in an Erasmus+ programme does.

Doing therapeutic youth work, on the other hand, means facilitating ordinary moments — energizers, activities, debriefs, conflicts, dinners, transitions — with a quality of presence, awareness, and attention to process that produces growth. Without touching the wound directly. The

young person is more met, more seen, more able to think and feel; but no surgery has been done, because surgery is not your job.

The metaphor that helps

> *« Therapy works the open wound. Therapeutic youth work tends the conditions for healing — cleans the table, washes the hands, holds the hand of the one who is trembling, makes sure the room is warm and lit. The youth worker does not operate the cut. But everything they do around it is serious work, and it is the work that makes the cut survivable. »*

This document walks you through six moments of a typical day in youth work, residential or daily, and shows how Gestalt awareness changes each of them — and where the line is, in each, between therapeutic work and therapy. The line matters. Crossing it harms the young person and harms you.

The six moments

These are the six moments that, in our observation, most clearly show how Gestalt sensibility infuses ordinary youth work. They are organised chronologically, as they tend to appear in a residential or extended programme, but they apply equally to a regular afternoon in a youth centre or a school workshop.

- Moment 1 — Arrival and morning circle (around 08:30).
- Moment 2 — Energizer or warm-up (around 09:00).
- Moment 3 — Activity facilitation (around 10:00).
- Moment 4 — The unexpected conflict (anytime, often around midday).
- Moment 5 — Debriefing and reflection (around 16:00).
- Moment 6 — Informal moments (evenings, meals, corridors).

Each moment follows the same structure: how it usually goes, what the Gestalt shift looks like, a clinical example from a real situation, and where the ethical line is between therapeutic work and therapy.

Moment 1 · Arrival and morning circle

Around 08:30. The participants arrive at the venue, the school, the centre. The first contact of the day. Everything that happens later is shaped, in part, by what happens here.

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

The youth worker is busy preparing the room, checking the materials, reviewing the schedule. They greet participants politely as they arrive but their attention is mostly on logistics. The day starts « when everyone is here » — the morning is preparation, not work yet.

GESTALT-INFORMED

The youth worker is already working from the moment the door opens. They feel the temperature of each arrival — who comes in heavy, who light, who avoids eye contact. The morning circle is not a formality; it is the first reading of the field. The day adjusts to what is actually present, not to what was planned.

A real example

A residential programme. Day 4 of the week. The youth worker arrives early to the meeting room. As participants enter, she does not bury her head in her phone or her notes. She greets each one by name and lets her gaze rest on them for two seconds — the time it takes to actually see how they arrived. She notices that one participant, who has been bright all week, comes in with shoulders forward and eyes down. Another, who tends to be quiet, looks unusually awake. A third has clearly slept badly.

In the morning circle, instead of jumping straight into the planned content, she says: « Before we start, let me ask you something. On a scale of one to five, where one is I am completely not here and five is I am fully here, how present do you feel right now? » They share. Several say two or three. She does not try to fix that; she simply acknowledges: « good to know. We will go gently this morning. » The day proceeds with that information held.

Where the line is

✓ **STILL YOUR ROLE**

Reading the field as people arrive. Adjusting the morning's

✗ **BEYOND YOUR ROLE**

Singling out a participant who looks heavy and asking publicly «

intensity to what the bodies in the room can hold. Asking simple presence questions in the circle. Naming what you sense in the room without making any individual the protagonist.

are you okay? Did something happen at home? » This puts them on the spot, demands disclosure they may not be ready for, and turns the morning circle into a therapy session with an audience.

« The work begins the moment the door opens, not when the schedule says. »

Moment 2 · Energizer / warm-up

Around 09:00. The first physical activity of the day. Often something playful, fast, designed to wake bodies and bring the group into the same rhythm.

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

The energizer is treated as a transition device. Choose one from a bank of warm-ups, run it for ten minutes, generate energy, move on. Goal: activate the group. Success measured by laughter and movement.

GESTALT-INFORMED

Bodies first, words later. The energizer is chosen with awareness of where the group actually is — not always more activation. Some mornings, what serves is regulation, not stimulation. Notice who cannot enter, who hides behind humour, who overdoes it. That is information.

A real example

A youth worker has prepared a high-energy energizer for Monday morning — a fast game with running, laughter, body contact. As participants gather, she sees that several arrive subdued. Two are clearly tired, one looks

anxious, and the group as a whole seems to want stillness more than movement.

She makes a quick decision. Instead of running the planned energizer, she leads a slower one: a body scan in pairs, partners taking turns, two minutes each, simply naming what they notice in their own body. Then a slow walk around the room, eye contact when they cross. The energizer takes the same ten minutes, but it does not impose energy — it gathers it. By the end, the group is more present than any explosion of movement would have produced.

Where the line is

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Choosing energizers that match the group's actual state, not your schedule. Letting young people opt out of physical contact games without making it a thing. Offering modifications for whoever cannot enter the activity today.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

Asking a young person who looks frozen « what is happening in your body right now? what is blocking you? » in front of the group. Their freeze may be a trauma response that requires professional handling, not facilitator curiosity.

Moment 3 · Activity facilitation

Around 10:00. The main activity of the morning. Could be a workshop, a discussion, a creative exercise, a learning module. Often, on the surface, not designed to work emotions at all — it is about content, skills, knowledge.

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

The youth worker focuses on the content of the activity. The objective is the learning outcome — produce something, learn a skill, complete the task. Process is fine if it serves the content. If it gets in the way, redirect.

GESTALT-INFORMED

The youth worker holds both content and process simultaneously. They watch what happens in the bodies and the relationships while the task unfolds. The task is the vehicle; awareness of the process makes

it transformative without changing its content.

A real example

The activity is supposed to be about active listening skills. A standard exercise: in pairs, one speaks for three minutes about something important, the other listens without interrupting. Then they swap. Then they share what they learned about listening.

A non-Gestalt-informed facilitator runs the exercise, watches the clock, and at the end asks the standard questions: « what was difficult? what helps you listen? » Useful, but kept on the surface.

A Gestalt-informed facilitator runs the same exercise and, at the end, adds three small questions before the standard ones. « While you were listening, what happened in your body? Did you notice the urge to interrupt? Where did your attention go when you got distracted? » These three questions do not change the activity — they deepen it. The young people leave not only with a list of active listening tips, but with a small piece of self-knowledge about how they actually listen, and what gets in the way.

« Adding awareness questions to a standard activity does not turn it into therapy. It turns it into conscious learning. »

Where the line is

✓ **STILL YOUR ROLE**

Asking what happens in the body during the activity. Asking what the activity reminded them of in their daily life. Inviting them to notice their own pattern in real time. Linking the activity to the present moment.

✗ **BEYOND YOUR ROLE**

Asking « what childhood memory does this evoke? » or « who in your family does this remind you of? » These questions open biographical material that you are not equipped to hold and that does not belong to the activity's frame.

Moment 4 · The unexpected conflict

Anytime. A disagreement that escalates. A participant who walks out. Two members of the group who have been simmering for days and finally explode. The schedule is on hold. Now what?

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

The conflict is treated as an interruption to be resolved as quickly as possible so the programme can continue. Mediate, calm, find a compromise, move on. Goal: restore order.

GESTALT-INFORMED

The conflict is treated as information about the field — what was building, what was unspoken, what could not be held. Slow down. Read what the conflict reveals about the group, not only about the two visible participants. Resolve, but learn from it too.

A real example

Day 5 of a residential. Two participants who have been increasingly tense suddenly clash in front of the group. Voices rise. The room freezes. The youth worker has two options.

First option: rush to mediate. Take them both aside. « Let us calm down. What happened? » Try to find the surface issue (who said what, who took whose stuff), produce a polite resolution, return to the schedule. The group senses the conflict was managed, not understood, and the underlying tension stays in the field.

Second option: pause. The youth worker says, calmly: « Something is happening here that involves more than the two of you. Let us stop the programme and look at this together. » She invites the two to sit. She invites the group to stay present. She asks the two protagonists, one at a time, what they were feeling just before the explosion. She asks the group what they were noticing build up over the past days. She does not turn it into therapy — she does not excavate childhood histories. She uses it to surface what the group has been carrying. The conflict resolves and, more importantly, the group integrates something.

Where the line is

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Mediating the disagreement. Helping each side hear the other. Surfacing what the group has been holding. Naming patterns of communication you observe. Returning the group to a viable working state.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

Excavating the family history that fuels each side's reaction. Connecting their conflict to childhood dynamics. Doing depth work in front of the group on whatever was triggered. That is therapy — and it requires consent, frame, and training you do not have here.

Moment 5 · Debriefing and reflection

Around 16:00, or at the end of any major activity. The collective sitting-down to look at what just happened. Often the moment when the youth worker tries to extract the learning.

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

The debrief is structured around questions that elicit conclusions. « What did you learn? What was the main takeaway? How will you apply this? » The group produces neat answers. The facilitator collects them, summarises, closes.

GESTALT-INFORMED

The debrief is structured around questions that elicit noticing. « What is alive in you now? What surprised you? Where in your body did something shift? » The answers are messier, more specific, and more truthful. The facilitator holds the space for them without forcing closure.

A real example

After a difficult exercise on power dynamics in the group, the youth worker is about to debrief. The standard questions would produce safe, abstract answers about inclusion and active listening.

Instead, she asks: « Without saying anything for thirty seconds, just notice what is happening in you right now. » Silence. Then: « In one word, what is alive in you? » The group goes around. The words are more telling than any analysis: « tension », « relief », « sad », « still angry », « I want to leave ».

She does not analyse the words. She lets them be heard. Then, only then, she asks: « what surprised you about your own response in the exercise? » The conversation that follows is real, specific, and useful, because it started from contact, not from concept.

« Do not ask for conclusions. Ask for noticing. Conclusions can be faked. Noticing cannot. »

Where the line is

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Asking what is alive, what surprised, what shifted. Inviting noticing rather than analysis. Holding silence. Letting messy answers be valid. Letting one participant's noticing inspire others without amplifying it into excavation.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

If a participant opens unprocessed material in the debrief — tears, trauma, a story that comes out raw — do not unpack it publicly. Hold the moment with respect, acknowledge what they shared, close the round gently, and check in with them privately afterwards.

Moment 6 · Informal moments

Evenings, meals, corridors, smoke breaks, the bench outside, the kitchen at midnight. The non-programmed moments. The ones that do not appear in the schedule but, in residential work, are often where the most important things happen.

The Gestalt shift

USUAL APPROACH

Informal moments are time off. The youth worker uses them to rest, prepare the next session, or do their own thing. They are friendly to participants who

GESTALT-INFORMED

Informal moments are not breaks — they are part of the work, and often the most fertile part. The corridor, the dinner table, the after-shower silence. These are

approach but the work is paused. The work happens in scheduled time.

where young people land what they have lived during the day, and where they may approach you with what they could not say in the group.

A real example

After dinner, on day 5 of a residential. The youth worker is going to her room. A participant who has been quiet all week stops her in the corridor. « Do you have a minute? » They sit on a bench.

The participant says: « I have not told anyone. But what we did today reminded me of when my dad… » She stops. Looks down.

This is the moment. The youth worker has options. She can say: « oh, you should bring this to the group tomorrow. » Wrong. She can say: « tell me everything. » Also wrong. She can do what she actually does: she stays. She does not interrupt. She does not push. After a minute of silence, she says quietly: « I am here if you want to say more, and I am here if you want to just sit. I will not share what you tell me. And if it gets bigger than what you and I can hold, I will help you find someone who can. » The participant breathes, says a few sentences, and stops. They sit together a little longer. Nothing is solved. Everything important happens.

Where the line is

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Listening with full presence in informal moments. Holding what is shared with respect and confidentiality. Witnessing without rushing. Routing to professional support when material exceeds what the situation can hold — kindly, clearly, without making the young person feel rejected.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

Becoming the young person's regular confidant for serious psychological material. Holding ongoing « sessions » in corridors. Making yourself their de facto therapist because they trust you. This places an unsustainable load on you and deprives them of the help they actually need.

When to stop and refer

The line between therapeutic youth work and therapy is not always obvious. It moves with the situation. The following signals tell you that what is unfolding has crossed — or is about to cross — what your role can hold. When they appear, your task changes from facilitation to safe holding plus referral.

Five signals to watch

- **Trauma material surfaces.** Stories of abuse, violence, severe family dysfunction, recent serious loss. The young person may be telling you for the first time. Receive it with respect, but do not enter the work of processing it. That requires a clinical frame you do not have.
- **Dissociation appears.** The young person becomes flat, distant, far away. Their eyes glaze. They speak as if from outside their body. This is a protective mechanism, often trauma-related, and pushing through it can harm them. Slow down. Ground them in the present. Refer them to professional help.
- **Suicidal or self-harm content emerges.** Take it seriously, every time, without dramatising. Stay with the young person. Use whatever protocol your organisation has. If there is no protocol, a quick rule: do not promise confidentiality, connect them to professional support today, and do not leave them alone with this.
- **The same theme returns repeatedly with no movement.** The young person keeps coming back to the same wound, in different forms, week after week, with no integration. This is a sign that they need ongoing therapeutic support that you cannot provide. Recognising this is not failure — it is professional clarity.
- **Your own body tells you.** You feel out of your depth. You are losing sleep over a young person. You start thinking about them outside work hours. Something heavy has landed in you and you do not know where to put it. These are signs that the load is not fitting your role. Trust them.

How to refer well

Referring is itself a piece of careful work. Done badly, the young person feels rejected. Done well, they feel guided to the right place.

- Do not say « this is not my job » or « you need professional help ». Both feel like dismissal.

- Do say something like: « what you are sharing matters, and I want you to have someone who can really work this with you. I am not the right person for that, but I can help you find one. »
- If your organisation has a counsellor, social worker, or mental health protocol, use it.
- If you are abroad in a residential programme, know in advance which local resources exist. Have phone numbers ready before you need them.
- Stay involved at the right level — as the youth worker who cares, not as the therapist. Continue to be present without being the clinical container.

The thread that runs through everything

If you read these six moments together, a single thread emerges. Gestalt is not a method you apply at certain points of the day. It is a quality of presence that can run through every moment — the way you arrive, the way you read the field, the way you ask a question, the way you hold silence, the way you receive what comes.

That presence does not turn youth work into therapy. It turns ordinary moments into fertile ground. The young people you accompany will not say « my youth worker is using Gestalt principles ». They will say « with that person, I felt different. With that person, I could think. With that person, I felt seen. » That is what this whole week has been preparing you for.

And it is enough. You do not need to do more than that. You do not need to be a therapist. The world does not need more amateur therapists. The world needs many more youth workers who know how to be present — really present — with the young people they accompany. That work is serious. That work changes lives. And that work is, fully, yours.

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« Gestalt is not what you do — it is how you are present while you do anything. Therapeutic youth work is not therapy: it is the quality of attention that makes ordinary moments fertile. »

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EMPATHYE · Module 2 · Day 3

The Gestalt Attitude in Youth Work

A 90-minute session

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Why this session

Some of you have asked — directly or indirectly — how Gestalt actually fits into the daily work you do with young people. The theory sounds beautiful, but on Monday morning, back in your centre, with a fifteen-year-old who will not talk to you, what is this « Gestalt attitude » exactly? What changes?

This session is an answer, but not a lecture. We are going to touch it in the body first, and talk about it afterwards. Three exercises, then theory — in that order, because that is how Gestalt works.

Session overview

Opening & grounding	*10 min*
Exercise 1 · Five Ways of Listening	*25 min*
Exercise 2 · The Impossible Case	*25 min*
Exercise 3 · The Impossible Young Person	*20 min*
Theory & integration	*10 min*

Opening & grounding

10 minutes · Whole circle

Stand in a circle. Feet on the floor. One minute of silence — no instructions about what to do with it. Just notice the body, the room, the people beside you.

Then one question, one word at a time around the circle:

« When I think about my most difficult young person right now, what happens in my body? »

One word each. No explaining. This is the ground we will work on.

Exercise 1 · Five Ways of Listening

25 minutes · Groups of six

Set-up

Divide into groups of six (three groups of six, one of five — whatever fits). In each group, one person is the Speaker. The other five each embody a different way of listening. The Speaker tells something real and alive from their work — a young person, a situation, a frustration. Two minutes with each listener.

The five listeners

- **1. The One Who Already Knows.** Listens as if they have heard this before. Finishes sentences in their head. Nods with mild impatience.
- **2. The One Taking Mental Notes.** Listens to prepare their answer. Waits for a pause to jump in. Friendly, but already somewhere else.
- **3. The Problem-Solver.** Listens to fix. Interrupts with suggestions. Wants to help. Means well.
- **4. The Professionally Empathic.** Soft eyes, slow nod, the warm professional smile. Perfectly trained. Perfectly absent.
- **5. The One Who Is Simply There.** Does not fix, does not finish, does not prepare anything. Stays. Lets what the Speaker says actually arrive.

Rotation

After the Speaker has talked to all five listeners (two minutes each), take two minutes of silence. Then the Speaker says, in one sentence, what they felt from each. Rotate the role of Speaker — do as many rounds as time allows (realistically, two or three per group).

Closing in the whole group

One question to the circle:

« Which listener is your professional default? Which one is hardest for you to sustain? »

Short round, one sentence each. No analysis. Just the observation.

What this exercise teaches

The Gestalt attitude is not recognised by what the professional thinks they are doing. It is recognised by what the other person feels from the other side. Most of youth work training teaches us to perform one of the first four. The fifth is the one that is never on the curriculum — because it cannot be taught, only practised.

Exercise 2 · The Impossible Case

25 minutes · Pairs

Set-up

In pairs. Each person brings one real case from their work: a young person they feel stuck with. Not the dramatic one — the one who makes them feel useless, bored, irritated, or helpless. The one they avoid thinking about.

How it works

Person A speaks for three minutes about their case. Person B listens — really listens, like the fifth listener. No interrupting, no advice.

After the three minutes, Person B does NOT give suggestions. Instead, Person B asks three questions, in this exact order, and waits for the answer each time:

- **1.** « What do you feel in your body when you think about this young person? »
- **2.** « What part of you gets activated when you are with them? »
- **3.** « What do they need from you that is not a plan of action? »

Person A answers slowly. Person B does not comment. After the third answer, two minutes of silence between them. Then swap roles.

Closing in the whole group

Short round, one sentence each:

« What did I discover that I could not have discovered with a case supervision meeting? »

What this exercise teaches

Gestalt is not about what to do with the young person. It is about what to do with yourself while you are with the young person. These three questions are the spine of the Gestalt attitude in youth work: body, self-activation, presence beyond solutions. If you have these three, you do not need any technique.

Exercise 3 · The Impossible Young Person

20 minutes · Pairs

Set-up

Each of you writes on a piece of paper a short description of « your impossible young person » — the one that gets under your skin, exhausts you, or leaves you feeling you are a fraud. Keep the paper.

How it works

In pairs. Person A plays their own impossible young person (yes — you become them for five minutes). Person B is a youth worker. Person B tries three consecutive approaches, with about ninety seconds each:

- **Round 1 — Standard youth work.** Information, advice, referral. Professional, kind, solution-oriented.
- **Round 2 — Bad Gestalt.** « Tell me about your mother. » « What are you feeling right now? » « I sense there is something deeper. » The caricature.
- **Round 3 — The real Gestalt attitude.** Stay. Do nothing. Notice what they do to you. Give back, honestly, what arrives: « When you say that, I feel tired. » « I do not know what to do with you right now. » « Something in me wants to leave. »

After the three rounds, swap roles.

Closing in the whole group

« In which of the three rounds did you — as the young person — feel that the other person existed? »

Short round. Listen to what they say.

What this exercise teaches

Gestalt is not a technique you apply on top of youth work. It is not a set of questions to ask. It is a way of being present that makes everything else — the information, the referral, the advice — actually land. Without the attitude, the best technique is hollow. With the attitude, even silence works.

The theory underneath

10 minutes · Whole circle, closing the session

Now that your bodies know something about this, a few words to name what you have just touched. The Gestalt attitude is not a method. It is a way of standing in the relationship. It rests on a handful of principles — not rules, but orientations.

First person

In Gestalt, we speak in first person. Not « one feels », not « people tend to », not « young people in this age group ». « I feel. » « I notice. » « I do not know. » The first person is not a stylistic preference — it is the only honest place from which a real encounter can happen. When you speak from « one » or « the professional », you disappear. And if you have disappeared, nobody is there for the young person to meet.

Responsibility for what is mine

I am responsible for what is mine. Not for what is yours. This is radical in youth work, where the whole culture pushes us to take responsibility for the young person's life, choices, feelings, and future. Gestalt does the opposite: the more I carry what is theirs, the less space they have to carry it themselves. My responsibility is my presence, my honesty, my limits, my feelings. Their life is theirs.

Awareness of my own judgement

I am aware that I judge. Constantly. Gestalt does not ask me to stop judging — that would be a new introject. Gestalt asks me to notice my judgement, to own it as mine, and to be careful about what I do with it. The problem is not that I think « this kid is lazy ». The problem is when I believe that thought is the truth about them, instead of information about me.

Responsibility for what I become aware of

The moment I become aware of something — a feeling, a reaction, a judgement, an impulse — I am responsible for it. Not guilty. Responsible. Which means: I decide what to do with it. I can name it, I can hold it, I can share it, I can use it as information. What I cannot do, once I have seen it, is pretend I have not.

Here and now

The young person in front of me is here, now. Not last week's case note, not the profile the referrer sent, not the diagnosis, not the story I have already built about them. Those are shadows. The young person is always, only, here. The Gestalt attitude brings me back to this — again and again, because I will drift away again and again.

Contact, not fusion

Real contact requires two differentiated people. If I fuse with the young person (« I know exactly how you feel, the same happened to me »), there is no contact — there is one person taking up all the space. If I stay distant behind the professional role, there is no contact either. Contact happens in the narrow place where I am fully myself and fully open to them being fully themselves.

The body is not optional

Whatever matters, arrives in the body first. My own, and theirs. A Gestalt-oriented youth worker pays attention to posture, breath, tone, tension — theirs and mine. This is not mystical. It is the fastest and most honest source of information available.

One question to close

« If you took only ONE of these principles back to your work on Monday — only one — which one would change the most? »

Round. One sentence. No explanation needed. The answer is enough.

> ▶ **A note for the facilitators.**

This session is built so that the body does the work before the mind names it. If someone asks for theory too early (in the middle of Exercise 1 or 2), resist the temptation to explain. Say: « Hold the question. We will name it at the end. »

If the group is cognitively restless and needs a conceptual anchor to settle, give them only this, at the start: « Today we are not going to define the Gestalt attitude. We are going to practise it — and then look back together at what happened. »

The closing theory section is intentionally written in short, almost aphoristic paragraphs. If you have more time, you can expand. If you have less, each of those headings is enough on its own.

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Integrating the Gestalt Attitude

Possible adaptations for your facilitation

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« This is a menu, not a checklist. Choose two or three adaptations that fit the activity you are about to design — not all of them. Too many adaptations at once become a new rigid technique, which is the opposite of the Gestalt attitude. »

Mark the ones you commit to trying. Leave the rest for another time.

A. In the design

- ☐ Leave gaps in the programme — moments without planned activity.
- ☐ Reduce the number of objectives so each can be truly held.
- ☐ Open with a 3–5 min body landing before any cognitive input.
- ☐ Decide your role on purpose: neutral, protagonist, invisible.
- ☐ Drop one habitual technique and notice what happens without it.

B. Opening the session

- ☐ Replace the icebreaker with a presence round — one word each.
- ☐ Speak in first person from the start: « I propose », not « we will ».
- ☐ Name what is in the room before starting: tiredness, silence, distraction.
- ☐ Three minutes of silence before beginning, without justifying it.

C. During the activity

- ☐ Pause and ask the group where they are, not what they think.
- ☐ Replace cognitive questions with body questions: « what is happening in your body? »
- ☐ Allow silence to live, without filling it with the next instruction.

- ☐ Describe what you see, do not interpret it.
- ☐ Let conflict breathe before intervening.
- ☐ Ask the silent participant what they need, do not push them to participate.

D. Your body as facilitator

- ☐ Sit instead of standing for part of the session.
- ☐ Make real eye contact with each person at least once.
- ☐ Breathe consciously in moments of tension, without hiding it.
- ☐ Notice when your body tightens, name it silently to yourself.
- ☐ Arrive earlier for grounding, not for more material.

E. When something emerges

- ☐ When someone shares pain, do not rescue with technique — say only « I hear you ».
- ☐ When something derails, ask: is this interruption, or is this figure emerging?
- ☐ Validate emotions without interpreting them.
- ☐ Renounce closing everything — let some things travel home unresolved.

F. Debriefing

- ☐ Start with the body, not the mind: « how is your body now? »
- ☐ Ask two or three questions, not all the manual questions.
- ☐ Invite the silent ones first, not the usual responders.
- ☐ Share something of your own before asking them to share.

G. In relation to yourself

- ☐ Take 30 seconds of inner pause when activated, before responding.
- ☐ Acknowledge openly when you do not know what to do.
- ☐ Ask for honest feedback, not only the kind you want to hear.
- ☐ Receive criticism without defending for 24 hours before processing.

H. Co-facilitation

- ☐ Agree a body signal in advance: « I need a pause » or « take over ».
- ☐ Talk after each session about what got activated, not only logistics.
- ☐ Make explicit space for the other instead of competing in silence.

I. Closing the session

- ☐ Close with the body, not with words — a breath, a circle, a silence.
- ☐ Say goodbye to each person individually if size allows.
- ☐ Do not promise continuity you will not sustain.
- ☐ Share what the group has given you, not only thank them.

J. Underneath everything

- ☐ Practise « not knowing » as a professional posture, not a weakness.
- ☐ Trust the rhythm of the group more than the rhythm of the programme.
- ☐ Take responsibility for what is yours, do not carry what is theirs.
- ☐ Treat the group as capable adults.
- ☐ Let silence be — without educating it.

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Two or three is enough.

Less is more, when the body is the one learning.

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— End of Part V —

PART

VI

Relational Dynamics

Projection, transference, countertransference in the helping relationship

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Projection, Transference, and Countertransference

Three relational phenomena every helping professional should recognise — what they are, how they differ, and where they appear in your work

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« We cannot avoid these three phenomena. We can only choose whether we work with awareness of them, or we let them work us in the dark. The whole quality of a helping relationship depends on which of those two we choose. »

Why these three concepts matter

In any helping relationship — therapy, coaching, education, social work, youth work — three particular phenomena appear, again and again, with everyone, regardless of training. They are projection, transference, and countertransference. They are not pathologies. They are not signs that something has gone wrong. They are part of how the human psyche moves whenever a real encounter takes place.

What distinguishes a thoughtful professional from one who repeats unconscious patterns is not that the first does not produce these phenomena — everyone does. It is that the first one knows how to recognise them, name them, and use them as clinical or relational information instead of being driven by them.

This handout is a clear, simple introduction to the three concepts, with examples and with explicit attention to what changes when we move from a therapy office to a youth work setting. It will not turn you into an analyst. It will, hopefully, make you a more aware professional.

« Three phenomena always present. Three different things to do with each one. »

1. Projection

Projection is a defence mechanism described in psychoanalysis and integrated into virtually every depth-oriented psychotherapy approach (including Gestalt, where it is one of the five mechanisms by which contact gets interrupted). It works like this: a person attributes to someone else a content — an emotion, an impulse, a desire, a part of the self — that they cannot or will not recognise as their own. The other person becomes the screen onto which the disowned content is cast.

Projection is universal. It happens with friends, partners, colleagues, strangers on the bus. It does not require a previous history with the other person — anyone who minimally fits the role can become the screen. Its function is defensive: by placing the content outside, the person does not have to feel it inside.

PROJECTION

« I cannot tolerate recognising something as mine, so I see it in the other. »

Example.

A young person in a youth centre keeps insisting that one of the educators is angry with him. He talks about it daily, watches her closely, interprets her every gesture as confirmation of her supposed anger. The educator is not angry — she has been steady and warm. What is happening is that the young person himself is full of unexpressed anger he cannot yet own. By placing the anger in her, he can keep being the « good one » and have someone else carry the bad feeling.

How a thoughtful professional works with projection

The clinical move is to invite the person to take back what has been projected, without forcing or shaming. A skilful question is: « you say she is angry with you. How angry are you with her? With yourself? With anyone?

» The work is reappropriation — the disowned content returning to its original owner.

2. Transference

Transference is a more specific phenomenon, originally described by Freud and considered by most depth-oriented therapies to be one of the most valuable forms of clinical material. In transference, the patient (or the young person, or anyone in a sustained helping relationship) does not just project a fragment of content onto the professional — they import a complete relational pattern from their history.

In other words: they begin to relate to the professional as if the professional were a significant figure from their past — usually a parent, a caregiver, a teacher, a sibling. They expect the professional to behave like that figure. They feel towards the professional what they once felt towards that figure. They take, with the professional, the same role they took back then. The professional becomes invested with a history that is not theirs, often without anyone noticing.

TRANSFERENCE

« I treat you as if you were someone from my history, and I relive with you a relational pattern that has been waiting to repeat. »

Example.

A 17-year-old in a residential programme arrives consistently a few minutes late, then spends the whole session tense, waiting for a reproach. The youth worker has not reproached him — his style is warm and non-judgemental. But the boy keeps waiting. At the end of one session, almost with relief, he says: « just tell me already that I am not doing this right, that you are going to give up on me, that I should leave ». The youth worker has done nothing of the sort. What is being lived in the room is the young man's relationship with his evaluating, critical father. The youth worker has been silently invested with the role.

Three things that make transference different from projection

- **It is historical.** Projection does not need history; transference imports a specific pattern from the person's biography.
- **It is relational and complete.** Projection moves a fragment (one emotion, one impulse). Transference moves a whole script: who you are, who I am, what I expect, how this story ends.
- **It is clinically valuable.** Transference is not a distortion to correct but a window. It is the only place where a person can re-experience their old patterns in real time, with someone who can witness them differently.

« Projection moves content. Transference imports a whole relationship. »

3. Countertransference

Countertransference is the reverse of transference, from the professional's side. It is the set of emotional reactions, fantasies, impulses, and embodied responses that the patient (or young person) stirs up in the professional during their work together. For decades, countertransference was viewed as something to be controlled or eliminated. Contemporary thinking sees it differently: countertransference is information, often the most refined clinical information available.

There are two faces to it. One is what the professional brings — their own history, wounds, blind spots, that get activated by certain patients. The other is what the patient induces — the specific reactions a particular person, with their particular pattern, tends to evoke in others. Both faces matter. The professional's task is to feel the countertransference, hold it inside themselves, and use it to understand the patient better — rather than acting it out.

COUNTERTRANSFERENCE

« What this person stirs in me tells me something important — either about them, or about me, or about both. »

Example.

A youth worker notices that with one specific participant — a 16-year-old girl who shares very little and looks down most of the time — she becomes uncharacteristically maternal. She finds herself wanting to bring her food, ask repeatedly if she is okay, send her supportive messages between sessions. With other participants this does not happen. The youth worker pauses to reflect: what is this girl awakening in me? Is she reminding me of someone? Is there something this girl is silently asking for that I am picking up? Is my response useful for her, or is it about my own need to rescue? The countertransference becomes the clue — not the action.

Two questions every professional should ask themselves

When a strong reaction arises with a specific person — protectiveness, irritation, sleepiness, attraction, fascination, urgency to fix — two questions are essential:

- **What is this telling me about THEM?** What is this person doing — consciously or unconsciously — that produces this in me? Is this what they typically produce in others? Is this part of their pattern?
- **What is this telling me about ME?** What in my own history is being touched right now? Why do I react this way with this person and not with another similar one? What in me needs to be looked at, in supervision or in my own work?

The three at a glance

This comparative table is meant to be a quick reference. Print it, keep it visible, return to it when something happens in your work that you cannot quite name.

	PROJECTION	TRANSFERENCE	COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE
Who	*Anyone with anyone*	*Patient towards therapist*	*Therapist towards patient*
What is moved	*A fragment: an*	*A whole relational*	*Reactions stirred in*

	PROJECTION	TRANSFERENCE	COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE
	emotion, an impulse, a quality	*pattern from history*	*the therapist by the patient*
Origin	*What I cannot accept as mine*	*Early caregivers, family figures*	*The therapist's own history + the patient's induction*
Function	*Defence: I expel content I cannot own*	*Reliving: I re-enact a story that never closed*	*Information: what I feel tells me about the patient*
Setting	*Any human encounter*	*Most visible in deep therapeutic work*	*Any helping relationship, including youth work*

A useful subtlety

Projection inside transference

People sometimes ask whether transference is just a more elaborate form of projection. The clearest way to think about it is this: every transference contains projections, but not every projection becomes transference.

When the young man earlier expects to be reproached by the youth worker, he is projecting a critical voice onto her. That projection is part of a larger structure — the whole relational script of son-being-evaluated-by-critical-father. The projection is one piece. The transference is the whole house in which the piece sits.

What turns a set of projections into transference is that they are organised, biographically specific, and woven into a sustained helping relationship that gives them time to deploy. A passing projection on a stranger has no chance to develop into transference. A projection within an ongoing weekly relationship usually does.

« Every transference includes projections. Not every projection grows into transference. »

In psychotherapy

Different therapeutic approaches treat these phenomena differently. A brief overview helps locate where you are when you encounter them in your own work or in your own therapy.

Psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy

Transference is the central material. The therapist works largely through interpretation of the transference — helping the patient see what they are reliving and where it comes from. Countertransference is monitored carefully, often through ongoing personal analysis and supervision.

Gestalt therapy

The here-and-now of the relationship is one of the three pillars of the approach (alongside awareness and the body). Transference and countertransference are worked phenomenologically rather than interpretively: « what is happening between us right now? Who do I remind you of? What is being awakened in you? » The relationship is the laboratory.

EMDR and trauma-focused therapies

Transference exists but is worked less directly. The focus is on the processing of the memory network, not on the relationship. Still, transference often appears, especially with patients who have disorganised attachment or complex trauma — SUDs that fluctuate without clear reason, unexpected abreactions, avoidance of eye contact after intense sessions are often transferential signals.

Cognitive-behavioural and brief therapies

These approaches typically pay less explicit attention to transference and countertransference, focusing more on cognitions and behaviours. This does not mean the phenomena are absent — they are simply not foregrounded as material.

In youth work

Here we need to be clear, because it is exactly the kind of place where things go wrong. Transference and countertransference exist in youth work — they are not exclusive to therapy. Anywhere a young person enters a sustained helping relationship with an adult who matters, transference can emerge. And anywhere an adult professional works closely with young

people, countertransference is operating, whether or not the professional knows it.

The difference between therapy and youth work is not whether these phenomena exist (they do, in both). The difference is what we do with them.

✓ STILL YOUR ROLE

Recognising that a young person is relating to you as if you were their critical father, their absent mother, their abandoning teacher. Adjusting your stance — not to confirm the projection, not to perform the role they expect — so that they can experience something different. Naming, in supervision, what this young person stirs up in you, and using that information to understand them better.

✗ BEYOND YOUR ROLE

Interpreting the transference to the young person (« you are reacting this way because of your father »). Working their early biographical material as a therapist would. Using the young person's countertransference to do your own emotional processing. Engaging the transference as if it were your therapeutic tool to deploy.

What this looks like in practice

If a young person treats you as if you were their critical father, you do not have to interpret that to them. You do not have to say « I think you are projecting your father onto me ». What you do is simply not be the critical father. You hold a steady, non-judgemental presence. You let them experience, in real time, an adult who does not become what they expected. The corrective experience is not in your interpretation — it is in your different presence.

If you find yourself reacting strongly to a particular young person — protective, irritated, fascinated, sleepy, drained — you do not have to act on that reaction. You take it to supervision. You take it to your own personal therapy if you have one. You ask yourself the two countertransference questions. And you bring back to the work a more aware, more available version of yourself.

« In therapy we work the transference. In youth work we recognise it, contain it, and refuse to confirm it. Both are serious work. Both are different work. »

When to seek supervision

Some signs that the transferential or countertransferential field with a particular young person needs supervisory attention:

- You think about this young person outside work hours, repeatedly.
- Your reactions with them feel disproportionate — stronger than the situation warrants.
- You feel pulled to break frame for them (more time, more contact, special treatment).
- You feel uncharacteristically irritated, defensive, or rejecting with them.
- You sense you are repeating with them a pattern from your own life and you are not sure how.

None of these signs is a problem in itself. They are normal. What matters is that you notice them and bring them somewhere safe — a supervisor, a colleague, your therapist — so they can be looked at and used, instead of acted out.

Further reading

These references are organised by accessibility, not by chronology. If you are new to these concepts, start with the second group; if you want the original sources, the first group is essential; if you work specifically with young people and want professional development beyond therapy, the third group will be most useful.

Foundational texts — the original sources

Freud, S. (1912). The Dynamics of Transference. Standard Edition, Vol. 12. London: Hogarth Press.

The classic original description of transference.

Freud, S. (1915). Observations on Transference-Love. Standard Edition, Vol. 12. London: Hogarth Press.

Continuation and refinement of the 1912 paper.

Heimann, P. (1950). On Counter-Transference. International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 31, 81-84.

The paper that turned countertransference from obstacle into instrument.

Racker, H. (1968). Transference and Counter-Transference. London: Hogarth Press.

Comprehensive treatment integrating the patient's induction and the therapist's history.

Winnicott, D. W. (1949). Hate in the Counter-Transference. International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 30, 69-74.

Honest, ground-breaking paper on the difficult emotions therapists feel — and what to do with them.

Contemporary and accessible texts

Casement, P. (1985). On Learning from the Patient. London: Tavistock.

Especially clear on countertransference as clinical information.

Maroda, K. (2004). The Power of Countertransference: Innovations in Analytic Technique. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

Modern, relational reading of how to work with countertransference responsibly.

Stadter, M. (2009). Presence and the Present: Relationship and Time in Contemporary Psychodynamic Therapy. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.

Bridges classical psychodynamic theory with contemporary relational practice.

Yontef, G. (1993). Awareness, Dialogue and Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy. Highland, NY: The Gestalt Journal Press.

Gestalt perspective on transference and contact.

Spagnuolo Lobb, M. (2013). The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy: Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Contemporary Gestalt reading of relational phenomena in clinical practice.

Specifically for educators, youth workers, and helping professionals

Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., Henry, G. & Osborne, E. (1983). The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching. London: Routledge.

Classic text on transference and countertransference in educational settings — essential reading for anyone working with young people.

Bain, A. (1998). Social Defenses against Organizational Learning. Human Relations, 51, 413-429.

Useful for understanding how groups and institutions hold projective dynamics.

Obholzer, A. & Roberts, V. Z. (eds.) (1994). The Unconscious at Work: Individual and Organizational Stress in the Human Services. London: Routledge.

Foundational text on how unconscious processes shape institutional life.

Hawkins, P. & Shohet, R. (2012). Supervision in the Helping Professions. 4th ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Excellent on parallel process, countertransference, and the use of supervision — directly applicable to youth work.

Geldard, K. & Geldard, D. (2010). Counselling Adolescents: The Proactive Approach for Young People. London: SAGE.

Practical, accessible, with explicit attention to transferential dynamics with adolescents.

A closing thought

These three concepts can sound abstract until the moment you find yourself in a session, or in a corridor of your youth centre, and something happens that you cannot understand — you react in a way you do not recognise, a young person treats you as if you were someone you are not, the room fills up with a feeling that does not seem to belong to anyone in particular. Then the concepts become flesh. Then you remember that what is happening is not strange or wrong: it is one of the three phenomena, doing what they have always done in human encounters.

And in that moment, you have a choice. You can be carried by the phenomenon without naming it — and you will, sometimes; we all do — or you can pause, recognise what is happening, and respond from a place of awareness instead of automatism. The capacity to make that pause is, in the end, what distinguishes a thoughtful professional from a reactive one. It is not a personality trait. It is a discipline. And it is trainable, every day, in every encounter.

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« The phenomena are inevitable. Awareness of them is a choice we make every time. »

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— End of Part VI —

PART

VII

Resources

References, pocket card, integration, and a final word

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P O C K E T C A R D

Five signals to pause

When to stop, breathe, and consider referral

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This is the pocket card from the EMPATHYE programme. It exists because the work this book describes can take you, in a session with a young person, into territory where the right move is not to go further but to slow down. The card names five signals that mean: this is no longer the place where my role is enough. It does not mean panic. It means: pause, breathe, and re-evaluate the next step with care.

The five signals

I. Acute risk of harm to self or others

Direct mention of plans to end one’s life, plans to harm someone, or active self-harm. Not vague distress — concrete intention.

II. Loss of contact with reality

The young person is no longer oriented in time, place, or person; appears to be hearing or seeing things that are not there; or is held in a fixed belief disconnected from shared reality.

III. Current abuse or trafficking

Active situations of abuse, exploitation, coercion or violence, where the safety frame around the young person has already broken.

IV. Severe substance impairment

The young person is acutely intoxicated to a degree that alters their consciousness or capacity for consent in this conversation.

V. Sustained dysregulation that does not settle

The body cannot return to baseline despite your steady presence — escalating panic, dissociation, freeze states that hold for many minutes without movement.

What to do when one of these appears

1. Stay with the person. Do not leave them alone in the room while you fetch help — bring help to them.

2. Lower the intensity of the work immediately. No more depth questions, no more practices that mobilise. Return to ground: breath, surroundings, simple sensory contact.

3. Name what you are noticing without diagnosis. Something has changed. I want to make sure you have what you need.

4. Activate the referral pathway your organisation has agreed beforehand. If your organisation does not have one yet, this is the moment to name that gap to your coordinators.

5. After the moment passes, debrief with a colleague the same day. Do not carry the weight of this alone.

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« To know the line is part of holding it. The line is the place where care lives. »

CRISIS & ESCALATION CARD

When something breaks in the room

Three situations, three first moves — and where to read more

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This card is a companion to the pocket card on the previous page. Where the pocket card names the moments when the right move is to stop and refer the work onward — typically with a young person, in the field — this card names three moments that may appear inside a programme dispositive, with adult participants who have consented to depth. None of these is a failure. They are openings the work itself produces. What follows is not a recipe; it is a first move for each, and a pointer to where the book treats them with the time they deserve.

If the person in front of you is a minor, or if the situation matches any of the five signals on the previous card, that card takes precedence: stop, contain, refer.

If someone collapses.

Tears that do not pass, freezing, dissociation, a body that goes very small. First move: do not enter the material. Lower the intensity of the room. Move close enough to be felt as company, far enough not to add pressure. Name what is here in the simplest words: « I see you. We can stop. There is no rush. » Offer breath, water, a door to step out with a co-facilitator if needed. Do not ask deepening questions. The work today is to land, not to open further.

→ See Part V, ch. 3.2 « Working with conflict and crisis · First, regulate yourself ». → See also Quick Guide to Gestalt Theatre, « When to step in, when to step back ».

If someone attacks.

The energy comes at you, at another participant, or at the frame of the work. First move: do not match the heat. Take one breath you can feel, find your feet. Name what is happening, factually, in your body and in the room: « I notice the tone has changed. Something important is moving. » Do not defend; do not collapse. If the attack is at another participant, stand verbally with the one being targeted without escalating against the one attacking. The frame is held by your steadiness, not by your authority.

→ See Part V, ch. 3.2 « When the temperature rises in the room ». → See also Part I, the Attitude of Service handout, on what description (not judgement) sounds like under pressure.

If the group blocks.

Thick silence that is not the productive kind. Compliance without contact. A wall. First move: do not push and do not rescue. Sit inside the silence long enough to feel what it is made of. Then name what you see, without interpretation: « I notice we have gone quiet. I am not sure what is in the silence. Is anyone aware of what is here for them right now? » Often the block is information about something that was bypassed earlier in the day. Trust the group to find the thread when it is named.

→ See Part V, ch. 3.1 « Reading the body of the group ». → See also Quick Guide to Gestalt Theatre, on curiosity over control.

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« First, regulate yourself. Then, name what is here. Then, trust the group. »

4

Broader Perspectives

How this work sits within a wider European landscape

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« This work does not exist in isolation. It stands inside a longer conversation. »

The Empathye programme draws from several living traditions at once: the historical development of Gestalt therapy across Europe and the Americas, the evolution of youth work within the Erasmus+ framework, and the growing recognition in Europe that emotional and relational competence are not luxuries but necessities. To understand the depth of what you have been doing, it helps to place it within that broader landscape.

What follows is a brief tour of the territory around your practice. It is not history for its own sake. It is the context that lets you locate yourself — to know which lineage you are working in, which tensions you are inheriting, and which conversations you can join when you are ready.

4.1 Gestalt therapy in Europe

How it evolved

When Gestalt crossed the Atlantic in the 1960s, it found very different soil in Europe than in California. The intense, embodied, sometimes confrontational style that Fritz Perls had developed at Esalen did not translate cleanly into the European context. Each country adapted Gestalt to its own intellectual climate, its own institutional culture, its own way of thinking about therapy and education. What emerged was not one European Gestalt, but several, each with its own dialect.

Germany	France	Italy & Spain
Early institutes developed a strong link between Gestalt and phenomenology, emphasising descriptive awareness and the ethics of dialogue. Gestalt became a bridge between psychotherapy and existential philosophy — more academic, more careful, more grounded in philosophical rigour.	*Gestalt evolved within a rich humanistic and artistic scene. Institutes like the École Parisienne de Gestalt valued the integration of creativity, relational intelligence and philosophical reflection. French Gestalt has a distinct flavour — poetic, relational, culturally sophisticated.*	*The approach blended with community psychology and social education, creating pathways for Gestalt in non-therapeutic settings — social work, education, community organising. This is the lineage closest to what you are doing in Empathye.*

Despite these variations, the European schools share a common thread: the influence of Laura Perls' relational approach. Her emphasis on being with rather than doing to shaped a distinctly European sensitivity — one that values dialogue, awareness, and field theory more than emotional catharsis.

In contrast, Naranjo's lineage, rooted in the Californian countercultural movement, viewed Gestalt as a path of transformation that includes intensity, spirituality, embodiment and creativity. For Naranjo, theatre, music and meditation were not accessories — they were essential vehicles of awareness.

« Empathye consciously sits between these poles. It takes from Europe the ethical and dialogical precision, and from Naranjo the vitality, embodiment and spiritual openness that make Gestalt a living art. »

4.2 Dialogue and relational grounding

The I-Thou of Martin Buber

One of Gestalt's most enduring inspirations is Martin Buber's philosophy of the I-Thou. Laura Perls knew Buber personally; his thinking shaped the

relational tradition that ran through her teaching and through every European school that followed her.

Buber distinguished between two ways of being in relationship. The I-It mode is the way we relate to objects, problems, instruments — and, often, to people we have reduced to a function. The young person becomes a case to manage. The colleague becomes a role to coordinate with. The participant becomes a number in an evaluation form. There is information, but no encounter.

The I-Thou mode is something else. It is the moment when another person ceases to be a function for you and appears, briefly, as themselves. You are not looking through them at the task. You are looking at them. And — this is the part that matters — they look back. Something passes between you that neither of you fully controls. This is, for Buber, the moment in which the human becomes most fully human.

> *« The fundamental fact of human existence is human with human. »*
>
> *— Martin Buber*

Why this matters in your work

Most of the time, you will be working in the I-It mode, and this is not a failure. The I-It mode is necessary; you cannot survive a working week in pure encounter. The frameworks, the projects, the timelines — these all live in the I-It register, and they need to.

But the moments that change a young person's relationship to themselves are almost always I-Thou moments. A look held longer than expected. A question asked from genuine curiosity rather than from a curriculum. A silence in which neither of you is performing. These moments cannot be programmed. But they can be invited — by the quality of presence you bring into the room, day after day.

Buber's contribution to Gestalt is the insistence that this kind of encounter is not optional, decorative, or only for therapists. It is the ground of any work that claims to be human. Everything else, in his words, is grass that grows on it.

4.3 Gestalt and non-formal education

A natural alliance

Non-formal education and Gestalt share a common belief: that learning is not the transmission of information from someone who has it to someone who does not. Learning is a process that happens in the whole person — body, mind, emotion, relationship — and it is co-created by everyone in the room.

European non-formal education has developed its own pedagogical principles over decades — voluntary participation, learner-centred design, experiential methodology, recognition of competences gained outside the classroom. These principles are documented in the Council of Europe's youth-work frameworks, in the SALTO Education and Training resources, in the Youthpass categories, in the ETS competence model.

What Gestalt adds is the missing dimension: presence. The pedagogical principles tell you what good non-formal education looks like in structure. Gestalt offers a way of inhabiting that structure with awareness, so that the design does not become hollow. A perfectly designed Erasmus+ activity can still feel mechanical if the facilitators are not present in it. A simply designed activity can become transformative if they are.

Where the two meet most naturally

- **Group dynamics** — non-formal education uses group-based learning constantly. Gestalt offers the lens for reading what is actually happening in the group, beyond the activity plan.
- **Reflection and integration** — non-formal education ends sessions with reflection rounds. Gestalt teaches you to ask questions that go to the body, not just to the mind.
- **Conflict and difference** — Erasmus+ groups are diverse by design. Gestalt offers a way to hold difference without flattening it, and to work with conflict as field information rather than disruption.
- **Trainer development** — non-formal education increasingly recognises that trainers are the instrument. Gestalt offers a discipline for sharpening that instrument over time.

The alliance between Gestalt and non-formal education is not theoretical. It is being lived, every week, in projects across Europe, by trainers and youth workers who have found in Gestalt a vocabulary for what they were already trying to do. Empathye is one of those projects. It is not the only one. You are joining a wider conversation.

4.4 Gestalt as a bridge

The mental health crisis among young Europeans is no longer disputed. The data has been consistent for years now: rising rates of anxiety and depression, increased loneliness, deteriorating sleep, the slow erosion of attention and the rapid normalisation of distress. The pandemic accelerated trends that were already in motion. The institutions that work with young people — schools, social services, youth centres, mental health systems — are stretched, fragmented, and often unable to respond at the scale of the need.

Youth workers are increasingly the front line. You are not therapists, and you should not become therapists. But you are very often the first adult outside the family who notices that something is wrong. You are present in the daily life of young people in ways that clinicians never are. This positions you as a bridge — between the young person and the support they may need, between the world of professional mental health and the everyday spaces where life actually happens.

What Gestalt offers in this position

Gestalt is not a treatment for mental health conditions. The clinical territory belongs to clinicians. But the Gestalt attitude — the capacity to be present, to read the body, to hold complexity without rushing to fix — is exactly the quality that protects the bridge from collapsing under the weight.

When a young person sits with you in distress, the most therapeutic thing you can offer is not a referral, not advice, not a coping technique. It is your steady presence. The referral may come next, the advice later, the technique perhaps. But first, before any of that, the young person needs to feel that someone has actually arrived. That is what Gestalt practitioners call contact, and it is the thing most young people in distress have been missing for a long time.

And on social inclusion

Inclusion frameworks describe what equitable practice looks like in policy. Gestalt asks the more uncomfortable question — what does inclusion feel like in the room, right now? Who is being included into what? Whose body is relaxing, whose is bracing? What kind of difference is being celebrated, and what kind is being quietly absorbed into a smoother surface?

Real inclusion is a quality of contact, not only a feature of programme design. Gestalt gives you the lens for seeing this — and the discipline for staying with the discomfort that comes when you start to notice it. Most exclusion in well-meaning European projects is not malicious. It is invisible,

automatic, and almost always rooted in the unexamined defences of the people running them. Including yourself. Including us.

« To include another, you must first be willing to notice the parts of yourself that exclude. »

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« Empathye is not the only project doing this work. »

« You are joining a wider conversation. »

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End of chapter 4. Chapter 5 follows — Integration and Closing.

5

Integration and Closing

From training to a way of being

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« Integration is the invisible thread that gives meaning to everything that came before. »

The Empathye programme is not a series of disconnected workshops. It is a single living experience that begins with personal awareness and extends, slowly, into your professional and social practice. From a Gestalt perspective, integration means allowing the experience to complete its natural cycle — so that what was learned becomes embodied knowledge, a way of being rather than a set of techniques.

This chapter is not a summary of what you have done. It is a map for what comes after. The training room closes; the work begins. What follows is how that transition usually unfolds, and what you can do to support it.

5.1 From training to practice

How awareness becomes a daily companion

Throughout the Empathye journey you have been invited to encounter yourself — to explore emotional patterns, ways of relating, the impulses to help or to control. Gestalt does not aim to change these patterns by force. It makes them visible, allowing awareness itself to transform them naturally.

The discovery often comes with surprise. What seemed like a limitation — fear, impatience, over-responsibility — becomes a doorway to authenticity once it is recognised and accepted. The block stops being a defect and starts being information.

The programme culminates when you begin to translate this awareness into daily work with young people. The translation is not dramatic. It shows up in small but meaningful changes:

A calmer tone in moments of conflict.	*Greater tolerance for uncertainty.*
Increased ability to listen without rushing to fix.	*More spaciousness in difficult moments.*

In these small gestures, the essence of Gestalt becomes visible — the shift from reaction to presence.

A personal action plan, as a living compass

To sustain this transformation, each participant is invited to create a personal action plan. Not as an external evaluation tool. As a living compass — something you can return to when you have lost your bearings, written by yourself for yourself, in language no facilitator could give you.

The compass works best when it asks open questions rather than setting goals. Three that have served other participants:

- How can I maintain contact with myself while supporting others?
- Which simple daily practices help me stay grounded and authentic?
- How can I recognise when I am losing presence — and gently return?

This reflective process marks the transition from training to practice. Awareness ceases to be an exercise. It becomes a way of inhabiting your role as a youth worker, a trainer, a psychotherapist — whichever doorway brought you here.

5.2 Collective reflection and community

What needs to be shared, witnessed, acknowledged

In Gestalt, no process is complete without recognition. What has been lived needs to be shared, witnessed, and acknowledged within the group. This is not a ritual added to the end of the programme. It is the closing arc of the work itself. Without it, the experience risks remaining private, partial, easily eroded by the return to ordinary life.

That is why the final stage of Empathye includes a collective reflection circle. The form is simple. The group sits together; participants share what they are taking with them; each person is listened to, fully, without response or commentary. The container holds. Something settles.

Why the circle, and not the questionnaire

European training programmes have grown accustomed to evaluation forms. They have their place. But evaluation is not integration, and the questionnaire cannot do the work of the circle. The questionnaire asks you what you learned. The circle asks you who you have become while you were learning. The two questions live in different parts of the body.

The circle also does something the form cannot. It returns each participant to the group as a witnessed presence. You are not just a person who attended a course. You are a person who has been seen by these others, who have themselves been seen by you. The relational web that the programme has been weaving becomes visible, briefly, before everyone disperses.

Carrying the community forward

After the programme ends, this community does not have to disappear. With small, deliberate effort it can continue — not as a reunion, but as a working network of practitioners who hold each other to the standard of presence the programme set.

The forms it can take are many. A WhatsApp group that does not let connection dissolve. A quarterly online circle. Pairs that commit to peer reflection every fortnight. A shared document where people post the questions they are working on. The form matters less than the commitment. What matters is that the relational web does not collapse the moment the suitcases are packed.

5.3 Embodied closure

What the body holds that words cannot

Words can help integrate understanding. But the body holds the deeper memory of transformation. For this reason, the Empathye process ends with an embodied closing ritual. Through Gestalt Theatre, participants create a collective performance or symbolic act that gives form to their shared journey.

This is not a presentation for an audience. There is no audience. It is a creative act of integration. It can take many shapes:

- A movement sequence.
- A dialogue between polarities.
- A group sculpture of gestures and sounds.
- A shared improvisation.

What matters is that it emerges organically from the group's lived experience. The process of co-creation allows participants to express what cannot be said in words — the gratitude, vulnerability, strength, and connection that have grown amongst them.

The mirror at the end

The shared performance becomes a mirror in which everyone recognises the whole journey: the beginnings of curiosity, the struggles, the moments of laughter, the discoveries of authenticity. Things you had forgotten about your week become visible again, lifted into shared awareness by the bodies of the people you sat with.

As the performance concludes, the group often enters a moment of silence. It is not an empty silence but a space filled with presence. This silence marks the end of a cycle and the beginning of another. It allows the experience to settle deeply, beyond concepts or explanations.

« There is nothing to add, nothing to explain. Just being together with what has been. »

5.4 Moving forward

Continuity and professional growth

Gestalt understands integration as an ongoing process, not a final achievement. The end of the training is also a beginning — a call to continue cultivating awareness in daily life. There is no graduation from this work. There are only deepenings.

Empathye encourages you to maintain continuous reflective practice, so that learning becomes part of your personal and professional rhythm. This continuity may take different forms, depending on your context and your stage of life.

Four practices that sustain the work

Journaling. Tracking sensations, emotions, insights after each youth session. Not analysing — just noticing. Three lines is enough.

Peer reflection groups. Colleagues meeting regularly to share experiences and offer mutual feedback. Once a month is a real commitment; once a quarter is a placebo.

Short grounding practices. Before and after group activities, reconnecting with body and breath. Even two minutes makes a difference. Especially two minutes.

Supervision or mentoring spaces. Where facilitators can process challenges, get perspective, and renew their connection to the work. Paid, professional, regular.

What this aims at, and what it does not

The aim is not to turn youth workers into therapists. It is to help you remain alive, responsive, and connected — able to meet young people with authenticity rather than role or performance. The role stays the same. The presence inside it deepens, year by year, if you keep tending it.

When facilitators practise awareness, they become silent teachers of presence. Their way of being communicates more than any educational method could. This is not metaphorical. The young people you accompany are reading your nervous system before they hear your words. What you cultivate in private becomes contagious in public.

A wider statement, before we close

Empathye is more than a professional training. It is a small cultural statement about what European education can be. It proposes that learning is not merely the transmission of knowledge but the cultivation of consciousness, empathy, and creativity. The youth worker becomes a model of what Gestalt calls responsibility — the ability to respond to life with awareness and integrity.

By integrating the principles of Gestalt Therapy and Gestalt Theatre, Empathye offers a vision of education that unites depth and play, awareness and expression, individuality and community, personal growth and social transformation. None of these pairs is a contradiction. Each is a polarity to be held.

« You leave not as a finished product but as a practitioner of awareness. »

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« Transformation is not an event. »

« It is an ongoing process of becoming. »

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End of chapter 5. A final word follows.

A final word

From Diego, in his own voice

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I want to close with something true.

I did not arrive to Gestalt or to theatre work looking for more methods. I arrived because I was tired. Because I was giving too much, trying too hard, carrying responsibilities that were slowly burning me out. I was present for everyone except myself.

Gestalt did not give me a new set of techniques. It gave me a way back to myself. A way to set limits without guilt. A way to listen without disappearing. A way to hold others without abandoning my own centre.

And something shifted. The moment I stopped trying to be the “ideal” facilitator and started showing up as a real person — with my clarity, my warmth, my doubts, my limits — my work deepened. Not because I did more, but because I inhabited myself more fully.

That is what I hope this booklet offers you. Not a catalogue of exercises, but a way of being that is sustainable, grounded, and alive. A way of facilitating that includes your humanity rather than hiding it.

« Young people don't need perfection from us. They need presence. »

They need adults who can stay open, curious, and responsive. Adults who model resilience not by avoiding difficulty, but by meeting it with authenticity. Adults who, when something cracks, do not pretend it has not. The young people I have worked with over the years have taught me this again and again. They are not impressed by our masks. They are softened by our truth.

If this book helps you find one more inch of that truth in your own work — if it helps you stay one more minute with a participant when you would have

rushed past, or close a session two minutes earlier when you would have over-extended — it has done its job. The rest of the work will be done by you, in rooms I will never see, with people I will never meet. That is how it should be.

There is one last thing. Laura and I did not write this alone. The chapters here carry the voices of every participant who pushed back when we were vague, every colleague who corrected us when we were certain, every young person whose silence made us realise the question we were asking was the wrong one. The book is signed with two names because that is the legal convention. It belongs to many more people than that.

And that includes you, now. By reading this far, you are part of what the book will become. The next edition — and there will be one — will carry what you do with this material in the year ahead.

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Welcome to the work.

Welcome to yourself.

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Diego Marín Romera

Casa del Trigo · La Almudema · 2026

This book is a living document. It will evolve, just as we do —

through experience, dialogue, and the courage to stay present.

E M P A T H Y E

Annexes

Workbook, chronicle, and resources

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This appendix gathers the materials that complement the body of the EMPATHYE booklet — three resources you will return to at different moments of your work.

Annex A · The Compass Within

A self-inventory in two parallel versions — one for the international facilitator in non-formal education, one for the practising clinician — to be used at the end of the training and re-visited in the years that follow.

Annex B · Day by Day

The chronicle of the two residential modules of EMPATHYE 2026 — twelve working days at Casa del Trigo, recorded for those who want to recognise where each piece of the work comes from.

Annex C · Music

Diego's playlists — used during the modules, shared here so that you can use them in your own facilitation.

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ANNEX

A

The Compass Within

A self-inventory · two parallel versions

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EMPATHYE · Module 2 · Day 6

For the international facilitator

In non-formal education

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Why this inventory

This inventory is an invitation to look at your work as a facilitator from a different angle than the one most training courses offer.

Most facilitator training focuses on what to do with the group: how to design, how to deliver, how to evaluate. Few trainings invite you to look — with the same rigour — at yourself while you are working. And yet whatever you do not notice in your own character ends up shaping the course more than your programme design does.

The questions that follow are not about whether you are a « good » or a « bad » facilitator. They are about the patterns of your character — the ways you, as a person, automatically respond to certain situations in a course. Because those patterns are working in every session, whether you notice them or not.

Take your time. There is no right answer. Notice the questions that make you uncomfortable — those are usually the most useful.

« As you go through the inventory, hold one question underneath everything: Am I responding to what this group genuinely needs, or to something of my own that is being triggered? »

A. Before the course — design and preparation

1. When I choose the activities for a programme, do I choose what the group will need, or what I am good at facilitating?

2. Do I need the programme fully closed to feel safe, or can I leave space for what is unknown?

3. What role do I unconsciously reserve for myself in the activities — neutral, protagonist, « star facilitator », invisible?

B. Arrival and first day

4. When I walk into the room with the group for the first time, what do I look for with my eyes — friendly faces, leaders, challengers, who is missing?

5. Do I need to be liked quickly? What do I do to make that happen?

6. Does the silence of the group on the first day make me uncomfortable, and what do I do with that discomfort?

C. During the activities

7. When an activity does not work as I expected, what do I do — push it, cut it, change it, blame myself, blame the group?

8. Which kind of participant activates me the most — the challenger, the silent one, the seductive one, the crying one, the know-it-all?

9. What physical sensation appears when I realise I do not know what to do?

D. Conflict in the group

10. When tension appears between participants, do I let it breathe or do I intervene quickly?

11. When someone challenges me as a facilitator, what gets activated in my body — and what do I do with it?

12. Do I tolerate sustained conflict, or do I need to resolve it fast to feel okay?

E. Vulnerability and emotion in the group

13. When a participant shares something painful, do I need to say something « useful », or can I simply be there?

14. Do I keep professional distance as a defence against my own emotion?

15. When the whole group is moved, do I sustain it or do I cut it with a joke, an explanation, or a technique?

F. Low energy, dispersion, boredom

16. When the group disconnects, do I personalise it (« I have failed ») or do I read it (« something is happening in the group »)?

17. Do I raise my own energy to « save » the activity, or do I respect the rhythm of the group?

18. Does the boredom of the group scare me — and why?

G. Co-facilitation

19. When my co-facilitator intervenes in a way different from mine, what do I feel?

20. Do I silently compete with my co-facilitator — for the group's attention, for the most brilliant intervention, for control?

21. Do I talk with them about my activations, or do I keep them inside?

H. Debriefing and processing

22. What is hardest for me in a debriefing — the silence, the obvious answers, the intense emotions, the unexpected question?

23. Do I ask the questions the group needs, or the ones I know how to ask well?

24. Do I close the debriefing when the group is ready, or when I am?

I. Authority and power

25. When someone questions my authority as facilitator, what gets activated?

26. Do I use my position to impose my view, or to hold the group?

27. How do I react when a participant perceives me as a paternal or maternal figure?

J. Criticism and feedback

28. When I receive criticism from the group or the organisation, what do I do in the first twenty-four hours — process it or ruminate it?

29. Do I use criticism to grow, or to reinforce my insecurity?

30. Do I know how to ask for honest feedback, or only for the kind that confirms what I want to hear?

K. Closing the course

31. What do I love most about closing a course — and what costs me most?

32. Do I need the group to thank me to feel that the course worked?

33. Do I take time to say goodbye properly, or do I rush through it?

L. After the course

34. Do I review the course constructively, or do I obsess over what went wrong?

35. Do I speak about « my group », « my participants » as if they were mine?

36. Do I need the next course to feel good?

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Personal map for the peer practice session

After completing the inventory, fill in this table with what came up:

	THE 3 SITUATIONS THAT ACTIVATE ME MOST	THE PHYSICAL SENSATION THAT WARNS ME	WHAT I USUALLY DO AUTOMATICALLY
1.			
2.			
3.			

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One last question

« In which of these situations am I serving the group's real needs, and in which am I serving my own? »

Bring this question with you into the peer practice session.

For the practising clinician

Across orientations

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Why this inventory

This inventory is an invitation to look at your work as a therapist from a different angle than the one most clinical training offers.

Most of us were trained to think about the patient: their symptoms, their cognitions, their behaviours, their history. Few trainings invite us to look — with the same rigour — at ourselves while we are working. And yet there is now a substantial body of evidence, across orientations, that the strongest predictor of therapeutic outcome is not the technique we use, but the quality of our presence and the relationship we build.

The questions that follow are not about whether you are a « good » or a « bad » therapist. They are about the patterns of your character — the ways you, as a person, automatically respond to certain situations in the consulting room. Because those patterns are working in every session, whether you notice them or not. And whatever you do not notice ends up shaping the therapy more than your model does.

Take your time. There is no right answer. Notice the questions that make you uncomfortable — those are usually the most useful.

« As you go through the inventory, hold one question underneath everything: Am I responding to what my patient genuinely needs, or to something of my own that is being triggered? »

A. Before the session

1. When I prepare for a session, am I more focused on what I am going to do with the patient, or on how I am going to be with them?

2. Do I review the previous session looking for what I missed, or what worked, or do I avoid reviewing it?

3. What is the state of my own body and mind when the patient walks through the door — and how aware am I of it?

B. The first encounter with a new patient

4. In the first ten minutes with a new patient, what am I most attentive to — their words, their body, my own reactions, the diagnostic picture?

5. Do I need to feel competent quickly with a new patient? What do I do to achieve that?

6. Do I form a first impression I trust, or do I distrust it and over-rely on assessment tools?

C. The frame and the limits

7. When a patient pushes the frame — late arrival, extra phone calls, requests outside the agreed structure — do I hold the limit consistently, or do I bend it depending on who is asking?

8. Do I struggle more to set limits with patients who are vulnerable, or with patients who are demanding?

9. When I bend a limit, do I tell the patient I am bending it, or do I do it silently?

D. The therapeutic alliance

10. With which kind of patient does the alliance form most easily for me — and with which kind does it cost me most?

11. When the patient does not feel a strong alliance with me, what do I tend to do — try harder, withdraw, intellectualise, refer them out?

12. Do I confuse the patient liking me with the alliance being strong?

E. The patient's silence

13. When the patient falls silent, what is the first thing I feel in my body?

14. Do I tend to fill the silence with a question, an interpretation, a reformulation — or can I stay in it?

15. Whose silence is harder for me to tolerate: the patient's, or my own?

F. When the patient suffers intensely

16. When the patient is in acute distress, do I feel pulled to « fix » the suffering, or can I stay with them inside it?

17. Do I have a physical reaction (tension, holding my breath, leaning away or in too close) when intense emotion is in the room?

18. Do I rely on technique (a grounding exercise, a cognitive reframe, a homework task) to manage my own discomfort, or only when the patient genuinely needs it?

G. What happens between us

19. When I notice that I am having a strong feeling about a patient — affection, irritation, attraction, boredom, helplessness — do I take it as professional information, or do I try to make it disappear?

20. With which patients does my mind wander most often during sessions — and what do those patients have in common?

21. Have I ever found myself thinking about a patient outside of work hours in a way that I would not say out loud to a colleague? What does that tell me?

H. Confrontation and disagreement

22. When I disagree with what the patient is saying or doing, do I voice it, or do I stay diplomatically neutral?

23. When the patient confronts me — questions my competence, challenges my interpretation, expresses anger toward me — what gets activated in my body, and what do I do with it?

24. Do I tend to over-explain when challenged?

I. Material that touches me personally

25. When a patient brings something that resonates with my own life — loss, illness, relationship struggles, parenting — do I notice the resonance, and how does it affect what I do next?

26. Have I ever avoided a topic with a patient because it was too close to me personally? Did I name it to myself?

27. Do I have a regular space (supervision, personal therapy, peer group) to process the material that my patients leave inside me?

J. When the process gets stuck

28. When therapy stalls, do I look first at what the patient is doing, what I am doing, or what is happening between us?

29. Do I tend to blame myself for the stuck-ness, the patient, or the model — and which is my default?

30. Do I name the stuck-ness with the patient, or do I keep working as if everything were fine?

K. Ending the therapeutic process

31. How do I feel when a patient announces they want to end therapy — relieved, hurt, professionally satisfied, defensive?

32. Do I tend to extend treatments longer than necessary, or end them earlier than I should — and what does my pattern tell me about my character?

33. Do I take time to honour the ending of a therapy properly, or do I treat it as just another session?

L. After the session and beyond

34. After a difficult session, what do I do — supervise it, talk to a colleague, ruminate alone, push it away, look at my notes, drink something, eat something?

35. Do I ever speak about « my patients » as if they were mine? What does that say?

36. When a patient improves and leaves, do I feel professionally fulfilled, or do I feel a quiet emptiness I do not always name?

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« The compass is within. It does not point to north. It points to wherever your character is asking to be seen. »

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A N N E X

B

Day by Day

The chronicle of the two residential modules

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EMPATHYE · Module 1

Module 1 — Day by Day

The first six days · Foundations of presence and awareness

26 January – 2 February 2026 · Casa del Trigo, La Almudema

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« Module 1 lays the floor on which everything else stands. Six working days of presence, awareness, the cycle of needs, defence mechanisms, polarities, and integration. Each morning opens with body work and theory; each afternoon goes into Gestalt Theatre as a way of bringing the morning back into the body. What follows is the chronicle of those six days — the structure as it was lived. »

The arc in one page

DAY	DATE	THEME	ESSENCE
Day 1	26 Jan	**Here & Now**	*Presence, awareness,*

DAY	DATE	THEME	ESSENCE
			the body in the present
Day 2	27 Jan	**Cycle of Needs**	*Contact, withdrawal, projection*
Day 3	28 Jan	**Introjections**	*What I swallowed without chewing*
Day 4	29 Jan	**Introjections (deepening)**	*Retroflection, body release, group work*
Day 5	30 Jan	**Polarities**	*Embracing all parts of myself*
Day 6	31 Jan	**Integration**	*Bringing it all together · closure*

DAY 1 · *Sunday, 26 January*

Here & Now — Presence and Awareness

The body is always in the present moment. The mind travels to past and future. By bringing attention to the body, we anchor ourselves in the here and now. Most of who we are operates outside conscious awareness — and awareness brings the freedom to choose.

Morning — theory & exploration

- Introductions and framework. Welcome round: name, where you come from, what brings you here, what you hope for.
- Speed-dating connections: pair conversations exploring my work, my challenges, my strengths working with youth, my next professional goal.
- **Story of My Life — 5/3/1 minutes.** Share your life story with successive partners in decreasing time: 5 minutes, then 3, then 1. The listener responds simply: « I hear you. I see you. I bless you. » Listening from the heart, not to analyse.
- Mindful walk through the room. Sensing the body, the space, the group. Brief encounters: eye contact, showing hands, standing beside someone, observing their breathing.

- Three zones of awareness — internal (sensations, emotions), middle (thoughts) and external (senses). Practice in pairs: « I am aware of… » in each zone.
- Body awareness work: pressure-counterpressure, movement following, body dialogue in pairs.

Afternoon — Gestalt Theatre

Introduction to Gestalt Theatre as a grounding tool. Theatrical warm-ups — mirrors, stage exploration, learning to accept proposals. The body finds the present before the mind does.

Take with you · *What did my body feel today that my mind tried to override?*

DAY 2 · *Monday, 27 January*

Cycle of Needs — Contact, Withdrawal & Projection

Every need follows a natural cycle: sensation, awareness, mobilisation, action, contact, satisfaction, withdrawal. When the cycle is interrupted, we get stuck. Defence mechanisms are creative adjustments that once protected us — but now limit us.

Morning — warm-up & check-in

- Continuum meditation. Body dialogue in pairs, then between pairs.
- Check-in round: how are you, how was the night. Notice: do I share or stay silent? Where does that come from?

The defence mechanisms

We map the seven mechanisms by which the contact cycle gets interrupted — and we begin to recognise them in our own bodies, in our own days, in the situations we already know:

- **Desensitization.** Disconnecting from body sensations so needs cannot enter awareness.
- **Deflection.** Diverting attention away from direct contact to avoid emotional exposure.
- **Introjection.** Swallowing external rules without questioning, blocking authentic desire.
- **Projection.** Attributing my own feelings to others to avoid owning them.

- **Retroflection.** Turning energy inward instead of expressing it toward the environment.
- **Egotism.** Excessive self-awareness that prevents surrender to experience.
- **Confluence.** Disappearing into the other to avoid standing alone.

Mid-morning — projection work

- Contact and withdrawal exploration: walking through the room, eye contact then withdrawal, what do I need? Practice asking for it.
- Ask the group: in groups of five, one person in the centre asks for something they need. The harder question — what would I NOT ask for, that I know would be good for me?
- « When I see you… » in pairs: when I see you with this characteristic, I imagine this story about you. Listen, share back, switch.
- The question that's really for me: write a question you'd like to ask someone in the group. Then answer it yourself: what does this question have to do with me?

Afternoon — theatre

Feeling the stage physically. Entering and exiting fiction. Structured improvisations of couple conflict scenes: what do you feel in your body? Is this strategy familiar? What wouldn't you do to end the conflict — what is it that you don't allow yourself?

Take with you · *Which defence is so close to me that I had not even seen it as a defence?*

DAY 3 · *Tuesday, 28 January*

Introjections — What I Swallowed Without Chewing

Introjections are beliefs we absorbed from family, culture, and relationships — rules about how we should be, or how we should not be. They sit inside us undigested, creating conflict because they were never truly ours. Today we identify them and begin to release them.

Morning — warm-up

- Meditation on three levels: mental, emotional, corporal.
- « I see you. I let myself be seen. »
- Body work with rhythms: symmetric and asymmetric movement in two groups.

Introjection theory

Introjections come from every area of life — family, gender, money, work, relationships. They are imperatives about how I MUST be, or how I must NEVER be. We map common categories and begin to recognise our own:

- **Gender —** « Men do not cry. » « Women should be nurturing. »
- **Money —** « Rich people are greedy. » « Money is hard to earn. »
- **Work —** « You must work hard to deserve rest. »
- **Relationships —** « Do not trust anyone. » « Always put others first. »
- **Family —** « Be like your sister. » « Do not be selfish. »

The introjection list — afternoon work

- Step 1 — write a list of introjections, the ways you have been told you should be.
- Step 2 — choose five and read them aloud.
- Step 3 — in pairs, share where each one comes from. Mother? Father? Culture? How does it condition your life today?
- Step 4 — body release. Feel the weight; then liberate (cushion against wall, partner becomes the introjection, you break free).
- Step 5 — rewrite the list. Reformulate each one to make it truly yours.

Take with you · *Which introjection runs my life so much that it disguises itself as my own thought?*

D A Y 4 · *Wednesday, 29 January*

Introjections (deepening) — Retroflection & Body Release

The work that began yesterday goes one layer deeper. What I do not direct outward, I direct against myself. Retroflection is the silent way the swallowed rule continues to organise the body, long after the words have been forgotten.

Morning — empty chair work

- Pairs with empty chair technique. Think of something you hold back — something you swallow instead of expressing. Something small that has hurt you.

- Practice putting it outside, saying it to the chair. What happens when you stop doing to yourself what belongs elsewhere?

Group body work

Groups of four or five. One person improvises with music, blindfolded. The rest of the group contains and accompanies the energy — a held space for safe release. The body releases what words cannot reach.

Afternoon — theatre with introjections

Each actor embodies an introjection. Constellation-style staging. We watch how introjections interact, conflict, and — when the conditions allow — begin to transform.

Take with you · *What does my body do, daily, with the energy I do not let myself express outward?*

DAY 5 · *Thursday, 30 January*

Polarities — Embracing All Parts of Myself

Reality is polar. Like yin and yang, opposites complete each other. We often identify with one pole — the acceptable self — and reject its opposite. But the rejected side does not disappear. It becomes shadow. Integration means owning both: I am both. I do not have to choose.

Morning — polarity meditation

Guided awareness of the polarities living in the body — inhale and exhale, right and left, inner and outer, front and back, tension and relaxation, movement and stillness, expansion and contraction, soft and firm. I am both. I can hold both.

Theory — how the split creates conflict

When one pole dominates (« I must be strong »), the opposite goes underground and returns indirectly: through symptoms (anxiety, tension), through projection (judging others), through compulsive behaviours (overworking, pleasing). The conflict is the signal that something disowned wants contact.

Common polarities we carry: Strong / Vulnerable. Independent / Needing. Responsible / Playful. Good / Selfish. Giving / Receiving. Confident / Insecure.

Empty chair — polarity dialogue

- Choose one polarity and its opposite.
- What is this part like? What is its function?
- How do I see the other part? How does it make me feel?
- What do I need from the other part?
- What agreements can the two parts find?
- Step out and observe. What do I see? What do I feel?

Afternoon — theatre with polarities

Theatrical exploration: embodying opposite characters, dialogue between parts, integration through action. The body learns what the mind cannot yet hold.

Take with you · *Which pole have I been refusing to inhabit — and what would it cost to invite it back?*

DAY 6 · *Friday, 31 January*

Integration — Bringing It All Together

The closing day. Everything from the week — body, emotions, mind, relationships — is gathered and integrated. Insights are expressed through playful improvisation and symbolic work. We close with clarity, appreciation, and completion.

Opening meditation — heart that embraces

- Arrive in the body. Feet on ground. Slow breathing.
- Review the week gently. One moment of presence. One challenge. One person. One strength.
- Heart attention. Imagine the heart holding all of it.
- Silently repeat: « I can hold the whole week. I do not reject any part. I take what nourishes me. I let the rest go. »
- Ask: what do I want to carry forward into my daily life?

Improv — objects in conflict

Pairs work with two objects that have a relationship (they belong together), a conflict (two desires that clash), and an urgency (time pressure). The exercise builds: choose objects, set the conflict, embody, interview the object, improvise the scene, end by doing something the character would never do.

Closing

- Best-friends pairs, two minutes each: « One thing I appreciate about you… » « One wish I have for you going forward… »
- Final closing round — « One thing I'm taking with me is… » / « One word for how I feel right now is… » / « A small next step I commit to is… »

Take with you · *The goal is not to become someone else. The goal is to become more fully yourself — present, aware, authentic, integrated.*

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« Module 1 closes here. What follows is the inter-module practice period — twelve weeks of carrying the work into your daily life with young people, journaling what surfaces, returning to Module 2 with the practice in your body. This is where the training begins to stop being a training, and starts being a way of working. »

Module 2 — Day by Day

The second six days · Character, depth, and the bridge home

20 – 27 April 2026 · Casa del Trigo, La Almudema, Caravaca de la Cruz

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« Module 2 begins where Module 1 left off — but with a deeper question. Now that you know the foundations, can you stand in front of your character and not look away? Six working days that move from re-entering the work, through the three centres in action, to the feared scene, the feedback circle, polarities under improvisation, and the transfer back into your daily practice. »

The arc in one page

DAY	DATE	THEME	ESSENCE
Day 1	Tue 21	**Reconnect & re-enter the character**	*Body remembers the group · framework laid*
Day 2	Wed 22	**The three centres in action**	*Mental, emotional, instinctive — laid bare*
Day 3	Thu 23	**Limits & the feared scene**	*The body says no · the facilitator's nightmare*
Day 4	Fri 24	**Feedback circle & service**	*What brings me close · what pushes me away*

DAY	DATE	THEME	ESSENCE
Day 5	Sat 25	**Polarities & the symbolic field**	*What my body refuses · the ceremony*
Day 6	Sun 26	**Transferring to real life**	*What I take · what I leave behind*

DAY 1 · *Tuesday, 21 April*

Reconnecting & Re-Entering the Character

Morning — body comes back first

- Grounding meditation; practical logistics.
- Trio massage with tribal music.
- Walking exercises in the room: looking at each other's hands; eyes meeting eyes for a silent hello; inhale = touch someone, exhale = release; inhale = brief embrace, exhale = release.
- Trios — three questions, five minutes each: what is still present from Module 1? what went away? what is new?

Mid-morning — entering the character framework

- Diego and Laura share pieces of their own character history.
- Pairs: what I hope this week brings to my own process.

Afternoon — recreating the M1 sculpture

- Trios reform from M1. Each person, in turn, recreates their character sculpture.
- Slow exploration: sculpture → walk → look → speak.
- Felt sense: qualities, body tension, emotion, comfort, view of others.
- Five minutes free acting as the character.
- Trio sharing — explorer first, observers after.

Theory — laying the map

- Temperament (born) versus character (built to survive).
- The three centres of consciousness: emotional, mental, instinctive.
- The three emotions character avoids: fear, anger, shame.

- Groups form by dominant centre — working hypothesis for the week.

Take with you · *Which centre led today? Where did I feel my character as a sensation, not a concept?*

DAY 2 · *Wednesday, 22 April*

The Three Centres in Action

Morning — coming into the room

- Meditation in pairs with whispered questions.
- Exploration of the large hall — change seats, notice activation.
- Trio massage: the clay sculpture (one shaped by two).
- Short round on emotional impulses.

Mid-morning — Tell me who you are

Trios. Each person speaks under three constraints — without explaining or justifying; without saying what I give or how I help; without deciding for myself, obeying the impulse instead. Reflection: which emotion did I touch? Which defence kicked in?

Afternoon — the living image

- Group improvisation: a single image at the centre. Example — delivery room: gynaecologist, mother, baby, nurse, jealousy, fear, the bed that holds…
- Small groups of six: build context and characters → freeze into a photograph.
- Photograph comes alive · freeze again · what feeling? what strategy?
- Switch role to one I have been avoiding · share the process.

Late afternoon

- Best-friends pairs: what does that character have to do with me?
- Plenary: boiling topics — temperature only, no analysis.

Take with you · *Which of the three constraints bit hardest? That one is closest to my defence.*

DAY 3 · *Thursday, 23 April*

Limits, Personal Space & the Feared Scene

Morning — the body that says no

- Long meditation: breath plus body sensation, in silence.
- One hour of body work: pairs holding a pen between them with shifting music; free movement; move as the most « X » person — never go to the cliché; discharge through dance.

Mid-morning — personal space & holy aggressivity

- Walks plus bell encounters — explore the no: with the eyes, with the body, with the voice (santa agresividad).
- Walk-toward-me exercise: stop them twice, the third time they don't stop. What rises in me?
- Naming: what concretely, in my life right now, do I need to say no to?
- Plenary debrief.

Afternoon — the feared scene of the facilitator

- Individual: list of feared scenes (each one named).
- Post-its · group selects four scenes that resonate widely.
- At the centre, the four questions: what emotion is here? what is happening in my body? what am I avoiding? what do I need?
- Connection: this scene → my character (fixation, emotion, instinct).
- Constellation format for the deepest scenes.

Late afternoon — three-moment choreography

- Ten minutes of preparation.
- Three movements, each one named: how I arrived at the start of the course; a significant moment of these three days; how I am right now.
- One by one, offer the choreography to the group.

Take with you · *My feared scene is the theatre where my character fails. The recognition is the beginning of freedom.*

D A Y 4 · *Friday, 24 April*

The Attitude of Service & the Feedback Circle

Morning — coming into service

- Meditation: continuum of awareness.
- Round · body stretches in trios.
- Frame: the attitude of service. Not pleasing, not judging. Serve the person, not my agenda. Serve the process, not my comfort. Serve what is true, not what is easy.

Mid-morning — feedback circle

- Two parallel circles. Diego facilitates one, Laura the other.
- Each person sits at the centre and receives: what about you brings me close to you / what about you pushes me away from you.
- At the centre: receive · do not respond · do not justify · do not flee.
- Speaker: speak from « I », describe what I see in my body, not what I judge in you.

Afternoon — peer practice sessions

- Pairs (preferably new): two rounds of 25–30 minutes, switching client / facilitator.
- Ten minutes of mutual feedback on the accompaniment itself.
- **Facilitator's role —** reflect what I see (« I notice when you speak about X, your voice / body / breath… »); awareness questions (what are you feeling? where in the body? what do you need?); use silence as an intervention; close with « is there anything you need before we finish? »
- **What not to do —** no advice, no comparing, no rescuing, no interpreting.

Closing — naming difficulty & antidote

- Notebook work, individual: a difficulty of my character that the group reflected back; its polarity or antidote (e.g. doubt → I act).

Take with you · *Which devolution surprised me? Which one am I tempted to dismiss? The dismissal is often closest to the bone.*

D A Y 5 · *Saturday, 25 April*

Polarities, Improvisation & the Symbolic Field

Morning — the mirrors

- Meditation 9:30–9:45.
- Mirror exercises with polarities: femininity, masculinity, fear, shame, anger.
- Quick improvisation round — only with numbers, no words: two people arguing about money; « I want to leave the flat » vs « I do not want you to go »; flirting in a disco.
- Replay one scene with words — keep the quality the numbers found.

Mid-morning — the polarity walk

- Two concentric circles. Walk in and activate the polarity.
- « I walk toward you to tell you… » — what you have done wrong; to claim back what is mine; to say goodbye; the introjects from my history that block my expression.
- Reflection: what does this polarity bring me? Do I need to redefine it?

Afternoon — long-form improvisation

- Trio improv: three siblings invited to make a film for one million euros. One wants. One doubts. One refuses.
- Watch your strategy · change strategy · do something your character would never do.
- Three different endings.
- Annika invitation: pursue desire without thinking about the other.
- Reflection: what did I, the actor, put of myself into the character?

Late afternoon — parallel improvisations

- Group split in two halves of around ten · one half audience.
- Five couples × five sentences (one hour).
- Triggers from three levels — mental: ethical or rational pressure (« we have to disconnect grandmother »); emotional: betrayal, abandonment (« I've seen the messages »); instinctive: domination (« you'll do what I say »).
- Mid-scene STOP → introduce the antidote / polarity character → continue.
- Long final scene with a volunteer couple.

Evening — the symbolic ceremony

After dinner, around 21:00 · approximately one hour. Form is its own meaning · no debrief.

Take with you · *Which polarity did my body refuse most? Its recovery is where the most range lives.*

DAY 6 · *Sunday, 26 April*

Transferring to Real Life

Morning — meta meditation & designing for transfer

- Meta meditation: send energy from the heart to those in pain.
- Small groups of three — design something for your real practice: a dynamic, a representation of a work situation, a presentation.
- Incorporate Gestalt elements you have learned this week.
- Twenty minutes of preparation, then present and facilitate briefly with the group.

Mid-morning — peer practice sessions on transferability (40 min)

- Quality of my character that blocks me most in my work.
- The antidote — does it relate to one of the three core emotions?
- What work do I sense I need to do?
- How could I take the first small steps?
- **Mutual feedback —** facilitator → client: a risk I see in you · a gift I see in you. Client → facilitator: how the accompaniment felt.

Afternoon — wrapping the process

- Small groups: create a sculpture, a scene, a sound, a gesture that represents what I take from this process.
- Best-friends pairs reconvene briefly for the closing exchange.

Closing ritual

- A circle. No commentary. Each person says only — what I take with me; what I leave behind.
- Goodbyes free after dinner · departure 27/04 at 7:00.

Take with you · *Recognising the character does not free us from it — but it gives us, occasionally, a sliver of space between trigger and response. That sliver, repeated over years, is the work.*

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A note for the road

Most of what happened this week will fade in the first month. Some of it will return as bodily memory in moments you cannot predict — when a participant goes silent and the urge to rescue rises, and the body remembers the silence is theirs to hold; when someone pushes against your authority, and the body remembers the difference between threat and invitation; when the room makes you accelerate, and the body remembers that slowing down is also a way of leading.

What changed this week is not your repertoire. It is the instrument with which you work — which is you. The repertoire follows.

« Awareness, in and of itself, is curative. »

— Fritz Perls

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Music

Diego's playlists for the body to find first

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EMPATHYE · Resources

Music Playlists

From Diego's facilitation library

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« Music does, in seconds, what words can take twenty minutes to do — it brings the body into a particular field. In Gestalt facilitation it is not background. It is structure. »

These are the playlists Diego has built over years of facilitation. Each one corresponds to a particular kind of work: creating characters, embodying polarities, holding a sacred moment, releasing the body, building team bond. Use them in your own facilitation as starting points — and over time, build your own.

Open each link in Spotify. Save the ones that fit your work.

Character work

♪ **Creating characters from the music**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7baxZaTvpjQjQBJxF8IY2o

♪ **Three personal qualities & three movements (choreographies)**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4etsbAmTXdqIpyoy5OXRhZ

♪ **Creation characters**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7baxZaTvpjQjQBJxF8IY2o

Group work and ceremony

♪ **African washing tunnel**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0snRfefOX7oXJdgnvC2R8x

♪ **Gratitude & farewell**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2eJHR1gAdbUOqK5LuQgDgi

♪ **Sacred moment**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7K98PCpd2sipVBcsLaLChd

♪ **Team building**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1t8mgSt1CcDqenG8szzkl7

Body and movement

♪ **Set your body free**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sxsSCClwJTnX4DnVZbfUD

♪ **Disinhibition**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1FUVOMwaXZcJyjgvBdmbgO

♪ **I walk to you for...**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2KbdAl5ZGnXieCCkoTSPD5

♪ **Absolute delicacy (Delicadeza absoluta)**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6UTFibFb4m2n3OTWLXri3H

Working with emotions

♪ **Fear**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2fEs8aTcg3EKdIaDku8mqa

♪ **Sensuality**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3jNy3MIJWY5t8ibDGRVtVL

♪ **Aggressiveness**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/62dmGQzQ8LFoadl5t6abrw

♪ **Sadness**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2mgT0qwjk49rSipVc94Pkm

♪ **Happiness, joy, celebration**

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0UbYJmqd7Fvx0QShQXrS5x

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« These playlists are alive. Use them, edit them, replace tracks that no longer serve you. The music is a tool, not an authority — and your facilitation is the place where that tool meets the bodies in front of you. »

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— End of Annexes —

EMPATHYE

Companion to the Programme

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A training course book on awareness, relationships and transformation — for psychotherapists, youth workers and educators integrating Gestalt therapy and Gestalt theatre into the daily practice of working with young people.

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Diego Marín Romera & Laura López Gámez

Casa del Trigo · La Almudema · Murcia · 2026

P A R T I C I P A T I N G C O U N T R I E S

Spain · Italy · Bulgaria · Poland · Slovenia · Ukraine · Portugal · Estonia · Denmark · Lithuania · Czech Republic

Published by YOMN · Now Matters Youth

A project co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme

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Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.