

*How to Choose*

*A*

*Psychotherapist*

Interview:

Abraham Levitsky, Ph.D.  
and  
Jeff Levin, L.C.S.W.

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## ABRAHAM LEVITSKY

**Jeff Levin:** Good evening. I'm Jeff Levin, and this is "How to Chose a Psychotherapist." Each week we'll explore a distinctive approach to psychotherapy with an expert in the field.

And tonight's very special guest is Dr. Abraham Levitsky. Abe Levitsky trained extensively with Fritz Perls, with whom he co-authored the paper, *The Rules and the Game of Gestalt Therapy*. He's been the President of the San Francisco Gestalt Institute, and has a private practice in Berkeley. His current interests include transpersonal psychotherapy and integrating Gestalt therapy with hypnosis and psychoanalysis.

It's my great pleasure to welcome and introduce Abe Levitsky. Good evening, Abe.

Dr. Levitsky: Greetings. Greetings.

**JL:** Can you tell us the meaning of "gestalt"?

**AL:** The word "gestalt" is a German term, and it means...it's not easily translated into English, so I have to give several meanings for it. It means such things as structure, configuration, wholeness. You might say: over all point of view, the totality of it.

**JL:** And how is that applied to Gestalt Therapy?

**AL:** You know, an interesting thing about Gestalt Therapy, or rather, a distinctive thing about Gestalt Therapy, is that it is so...so varied, so multi-dimensional, that it's really quite a challenge to both define it and to describe it, and to get over to an audience what Gestalt Therapy is like. So if we have some success this evening, in conveying the flavor of Gestalt Therapy, that itself will be a very fine achievement.

Beginning with, let's say, an example or two. Supposing that in a session, the client is telling me that just that morning a friend had been rude to him. I might say, immediately, "Put this friend, let's say, call him Jim, put him in this empty chair here and talk to him. Tell him what you think, speak from the heart, don't be concerned about being diplomatic, just say what you really might have wanted to say." Having done that, I might ask him to now change chairs, be Jim...what might Jim reply to that? Having done that, he comes back to his original chair and he replies to Jim, so that you can see, in no time at all we have got him involved, we've got him in action, and there's all the difference in the world between that sort of thing and just listening to him give his wordy account, essentially a verbal account, of what happened between him and his friend. Now, I might take it a little bit further and say to him, "You know, while you were talking to Jim you were talking about your anger but no anger showed up in your voice. In fact, practically no emotion showed

up in your voice. Now this time when you do it, can you let a bit of feeling come in?". So these are little examples of how...that's a little example of how Gestalt works.

**JL:** In terms of theory, the theory doesn't seem to be that there is "a way" to do therapy, but an experience that happens in the room, when you're right there with a person and interacting in perhaps a different way than just questions and answers?

**AL:** Well, once again, different Gestalt therapists, different experts, would give different answers to that question. There's plenty of theory. There is a school that is convinced that Gestalt has an extensive, involved, and very involved theory. There's another school of therapy, somewhat more represented by so-called West Coast or California Gestaltists, who are less concerned with theory and more concerned, in a sense, with the immediacy of interaction between therapist and patient.

**JL:** Gestalt has been very much associated with the mid-sixties and with Fritz Perls and with Esalen. How did that come to be?

**AL:** Well, it's a great story. There happened to be a brilliant marriage at that time, of I think three factors. One was the spirit that was extant in the sixties: the spirit of nonconformism; of searching for new and more meaningful values; the struggle against the immoralities of the Vietnamese War; the coming on the scene of the psychedelics, and the exciting new vistas that were opened by them, in spite of some of the silly misuses to which they were put. So that was one factor. Then there was Esalen itself, which was an, actually, brilliant invention of Richard Price and Michael Murphy, establishing a center for new psychological explorations. And in the midst of all this, there arrives in approximately 1964 or so, this maverick psychiatric magician and hippie, who just set the place afire with all kinds of drama, so that the place was cooking.

And he had such charisma about him, and such skill in doing what was then called and has since then been kind of conventional—doing those workshops, working intensively and at deep levels with an individual before a group, he had such skill in doing that, and had such a magic touch, that in a very short while his fame grew. And so, overnight, he became a public figure.

**JL:** Can you share some of your personal experiences with him and/or with Esalen?

**AL:** Yes, I can. One that occurs to me...see, I had the privilege of being with him during the summer of 1966, and I lived in the same house with him. And I'm in a position to say that it's a rare privilege to have that kind of extensive and intimate contact with a man who I think merits the term of genius. And I remember writing in my journal at the

time, "This is a remarkable and fascinating summer. I hope I survive." Because Fritz was not an easy person. I mean he had so many facets to his character. He was enormously complex -- he could be loving, he could be affectionate, and he could be a huge pain in the neck, and other places. He was not an easy person, but he was a stimulating and vitalizing person. And in terms of some work that we did, I can remember...ah, yes, well...one particular issue that comes to mind, when I was first training to do Gestalt under him, evidently I was not being particularly assertive in the way that I was leading the group, so he said to me at one point, "You want they should write on your gravestone, 'He was a nice guy'?" So, naturally, I got a little huffy and I said, "Well, what do you want them to write on *your* gravestone?" and he said, without missing a beat, "He fought for lost causes". So, that's a nice, little example of a Fritzism.

With regard to some work we did, two things come to mind. One was, and this will also be a, I think, a pretty good illustration of how Gestalt can work: I was talking with him and gesticulating and at one point, I think, my hand sort of went something like this, and since the use of body language and the interpretation of body language is an important aspect of Gestalt, he said to me, "What are your hands doing?". I looked at them and I said, "I think they're choking someone." And so he said, "Choke me." Which I did. Not too seriously...he was seventy-three and he had a heart condition, and I think I would have liked to have choked a little bit harder. But I got into the spirit of things and sort of choked him enough to make sure he knew I was there. But it's an example of the extraordinary and unconventional way in which he could use himself and establish a relationship between himself and who he was working with. And this inventive use of body language.

Another even more extraordinary example comes to mind. When on one occasion I was working on a dream of mine, which seemed to have to do with the fact that instead of confronting a variety of situations I was sort of jumping over them or sort of avoiding them. And so, we worked on that for some forty minutes or so and got to the point where the main themes seemed to be resolved, and for the moment I felt as if we were finished with the work. So he took his seat and I resumed mine and suddenly he bounded out of his seat, laid down on the floor, face down, and said to me, "Can you walk over me?" Now, I was 175-180 pounds at the time, this is a man of seventy-three with a health problem, but nevertheless sufficiently involved in his work and devoted to take this kind of risk. So, someone from the group came over and I sort of leaned on them a little bit so that he wouldn't have to support my whole weight. And I walked over him from, you know, he was prone, face down, from his ankles to his head. And then, as my sign of appreciation--I was, by this time, barefoot--I rubbed his bald head with my toes and said, "Arise, Sir Knight." And, of course, one could speculate, you know, a long time, as to "What was that all about...what was the meaning of that?" And we can't be sure, because he didn't say a word about it, and I didn't say a word about it. I've obviously thought about it for a long time

since. A friend of mine came over afterwards and said, "Don't get too busy talking about this experience or theorizing about it, just mull it over", and there's lots of reasons to believe that he was kind of saying to me, "Use me in whatever way you need to. Use me as, in a sense, a bridge to your own possibilities."

**JL: He seems also to have offered an experience, as opposed to interpretation.**

**AL: Well, it's interesting that you should use those words. I think your intuition is serving you well, again. Those very words were used by a classical psychoanalyst, Dr. Frida Fromm-Reichmann, whose work was done in about the 1930's or 40's, and she said, kind of as an antidote to some of the over-intellectualism in the psychoanalysis of that time, she said, "The patient does not require an interpretation, he requires an experience." And in a sense, that represents very nicely an aspect of Gestalt therapy.**

**JL: There are a lot of challenges that Gestalt makes to traditional psychotherapy. In your own opinion, are Gestalt approaches to therapy standing up well? Have psychoanalytic communities, in some way, been influenced by Gestalt?**

**AL: That's not an easy one. I think Gestalt has, indeed, made important contributions to various schools of therapy. And a lot of the spirit of Gestalt has been absorbed, soaked up, in various schools of therapy. In making the...in highlighting the importance of the therapist being more human, more real, more himself, less removed. Not all schools have been influenced in this direction, but some have. My own hunch and feeling about it, even though this might be somewhat self-serving, is that the nature of Gestalt therapy, requiring as it does, a more active and participative approach on the part of the therapist, is threatening to many professional people. And I think that's one of the important reasons why it hasn't received the recognition that I think it deserves. Because there is no question in my mind that this particular school of psychotherapy is one of the most exciting and innovative contributions to psychotherapy in our time. But you wouldn't know it from the extent to which it has been accepted.**

**JL: When I'm hearing you speak, I'm imagining there's a large variety of ways that practicing Gestalt has influenced you in your life. Would you share some of the impact of Gestalt?**

**AL: Yes, A, I'd like to, I'd be glad to. I don't know how specific I can get. The first thing that occurs to me is that the impact is enormous. Maybe in a bit I'll be able to illustrate just how. But the general feeling that I have is that I really would have--it's a kind of silly way to go at it--but I really would have felt terribly deprived if Fritz and the spirit and method of Gestalt had not come into my life. Because it's been enlivening, it's been**

inspiring, it's been growth-inducing, and one example of it, that now occurs to me, is that even though I've been practicing psychotherapy for a good many decades, I still have the very gratifying and exciting feeling that I'm just starting out, because there seems to be such an infinite amount to learn. And I remember Fritz's "number one disciple" at the time, James Simpkin, in the little introduction of his to a book of Perls', saying, "The kind of creative"--this is just giving a sense of it--"the kind of creative genius that Fritz is, is one that can never grow old". And I remember Fritz himself saying to me, one time, when we were just schmoozing in the lunch line, he said, "I no longer distinguish"--and he meant it--"I no longer distinguish between age and youth." And by that he meant that it doesn't matter whether you're eighteen or eighty, it matters what kind of a person you are, and how you and I relate to, and are with, each other.

**JL:** The impression I'm left with is that being in his presence was a challenge to be really present, alive, take what you get, never know what's coming...

**AL:** It's a correct impression, and the word that he used, and I remember when I would first hear it from him, I was kind of puzzled by it and it took me a little while to get comfortable with it, but the word was a very simple one, the word was "real". His goal in working with people was to help them to be real. And what is real? Real is authentic, non-imitative, being your own person, standing up for yourself, feeling like a first-class citizen, looking the world in the eye, etc. That's being real.

**JL:** And those would be the goals of psychotherapy, in the Gestalt therapy?

**AL:** Those would be the goals of...yes. Those should be the goals of any intelligent psychotherapy, and they are explicitly the goals of Gestalt therapy. And he exemplified it so well in himself that was part of the magic, and you know, anytime you were kind of phony, or putting on some kind of an inauthentic act around Brother Fritz, why you'd catch it.

**JL:** One of the things that you did with Fritz was to write a paper about the games of Gestalt therapy. Can you give some concrete examples of what is a Gestalt game, and how might you use it?

**AL:** Yeah, I think so. Take for instance, the notion of self-acceptance. Self-acceptance has been talked about in psychotherapy for a long time and by many people and the notion of acceptance was one that was most popularized by Carl Rogers, who by the way, was a man for whom Perls had the greatest respect, much to my surprise, because it seemed to me that Carl Rogers was a seemingly, kind of, conventional, not terribly colorful kind of man, even though he had come up with some important innovations in psycho-

therapy. But evidently, Fritz felt that his understanding of some very important and very deep concepts in psychotherapy was such that he, Fritz, was very respectful, respectful of Carl.

So having in mind that self-acceptance is a central notion in psychotherapy, it was part of the ingenuity of Fritz that he could devise relatively simple and mechanical little exercises which would give people the notion of self-acceptance in a few minutes. They might not learn it for all time, but they would quickly get a taste of it, and the way that you would do it is as follows: you simply make a bunch of statements in succession about present-moment awarenesses. And if I were playing the game, it would go something like this: Right now I'm aware that I'm fiddling around with this funny little staple in my left hand. And now I'm aware that my hand pats my leg. Now I'm aware that I'm momentarily at a loss for words. Now I'm aware that, for some reason, my left hand wants to do this. Well, these are present-moment awarenesses. There's nothing fancy about them, there's nothing conceptual about them, they're things that I observe. They're ways in which I'm living at the present moment.

Now we can change that into a simple little game, which on the surface looks and feels mechanical, but if you do it long enough and give it some thought, after a while you realize that it is just chock full of meaning. And the way it goes, is as follows: I'm going to do the game again, but after each awareness statement I'm going to add, mechanically, even though...whether or not I feel it...I'm going to add the phrase, "And that's all right". So. Right now I feel blank. And that's all right. I look up and I notice that you're looking at me with considerable interest. And that's all right. For some reason, now, my eyes focus on that stupid little paper cup in the corner. And that's all right. As I said that, my right foot tapped. And that's all right. Some of these things that I'm saying feel somewhere between absurd, and silly, and dumb. And that's all right. It doesn't feel very good and it doesn't feel all right, but that's all right. And that is very, very, close to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's variation on the "I'm OK, You're OK" business. She said that's baloney. And her variation is really very wise, namely, "I'm not OK, you're not OK, and that's OK." So it's the OK-ness, the all right-ness, which is to say, the acceptance, or to use a very funny kind of term, the "is-ness" of things is somehow taken into one's being.

**JL: One of the...**

**AL: Let me give an example to the contrary. There's this riddle: What's the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic?**

**JL: I don't know. What's the difference?**

**AL:** Thank you. The psychotic thinks that four and four is nine. The neurotic *knows* that four and four is eight, but it hurts him.

**JL:** And that's what you mean by, "I'm not alright, you're not alright, and that's alright." When you go through this exercise, even here in the studio, and talk about what you're noticing, what's that like for you?

**AL:** That's a very nice question. Essentially, it's good. I feel a little self-conscious about doing it. There is a kind of a silly element to it, because I can imagine hundreds of people out there in the audience, looking at this highly-trained professional person who's saying such profound things as, "My fingers are fiddling with this little piece of metal" and each time saying, "And that's all right." So, in a sense, I deepen, even at this moment, my notion of acceptance of how things are, which is to be distinguished from resignation. It is not resignation. I won't go into the distinction, at the moment, but it's a very powerful distinction.

**JL:** Well, I want to say that you have enlivened this show. And I want again to thank Dr. Abe Levitsky for sharing tonight. I hope you can tune in again. This is your host, Jeff Levin, and this is "How to Choose a Psychotherapist."

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