# *Part III*

## *Contact as a healing process*

# *10. The contact process as a cure for broken links*

The term ‘contact’ is used in Gestalt therapy with at least four different meanings (Pizzimenti, 2019).
Sometimes, in the PHG, we find it as a synonym for ‘contact process’, indicating the whole complex process of recognising, reaching, enjoying and assimilating an assimilable novelty.
Other times we find it with the meaning of ‘full contact’: that special moment when the boundaries between me and the world are no longer necessary and I, for a more or less brief moment, merge with the novelty I have encountered which is nourishing me and making me grow.
Again, we can find it as a synonym for ‘relation’. This equivalence is erroneous, because it defines contact as any occurrence between me and my environment, whereas Perls *et al.* clearly define contact as the “awareness of, and behaviour toward, the assimilable novelty; and the rejection of the unassimilable novelty” (PHG, 1951, p. 6). It follows that not everything is novelty and that we cannot speak of contact in an episode of violence. However, we can define that relationship as violent.
Finally, we find it as a synonym for ‘connection’. I find this last juxtaposition particularly rich and interesting, but also the bearer of an important confusion, which I think it is useful to unravel.
If we differentiate contact from ‘connection' we can read the contact process mentioned in the PHG in a key that makes the assumptions from which the authors start clearer. Perls *et al.* state that: “The Id is [...] the environment vaguely perceived, and the inchoate feelings connecting organism and environment” (PHG, 1951, pp. 156-157).
The bar separating and uniting organism/environment (i.e. the smallest, indivisible cell) indicates precisely the indissoluble ‘link’ present between them, on pain of death. In fact, no organism can survive for more than a few seconds separated from its environment, as demonstrated by the incredible technology and the money required for a living organism to survive in space. We are all connected, to each other and to our environment.
Quantum physics is proving that reality as we conceive it, the matter itself, does not exist, but only the connections, happenings, processes and events that are interactions between events exist. Only the ‘blurring’ of our vision unable to grasp what is small gives us an illusion of permanence, of concreteness (Rovelli, 2015).
Although we are always connected, we do not always have the perception and awareness of these connections. For economic reasons, the personality function – by creating habits – excludes many connections from our awareness. But if something new happens in that connection, we become aware of it again through the contact process and are able to assimilate or reject the novelty because of the contact boundary created in the moment.
When too perilous and/or painful novelties develop in the organism/environment field, we have two possibilities: we can ‘try’ to interrupt the connection through hallucinations or delusions, as in trauma or psychotic experiences. Or, if the danger or harm is smaller and therefore more ‘livable’, we can interrupt the developed contact process in order to assimilate or reject those novelties.
All of this takes place in the unstoppable figure/ground dynamic through which, on the innumerable connections existing in the organism/environment field, the novelties that will be contacted are developed.
That is why, in Gestalt psychotherapy, we say that contact heals. Contact makes the connections we have and from which we have alienated ourselves (and thus losing awareness) usable again, in order to survive unbearable experiences.
In this case we are not talking about contact, but about connection. The connection with the environment is

always there as long as I am alive, even if I am asleep or in a coma: life is connection and sharing.
However, PHG is clear: for contact to emerge and consequently the contact boundary to be created, *awareness of the environment and of assimilable novelty* is necessary.
'Modulation', for example, is one of those movements by which we raise or increase our own rhythm to match the other's movement, thus creating a new rhythm. The process of contact requires an effort of modulation and serves to encounter and assimilate the novelty. The purpose of contact, in fact, is the assimilation of the novelty in order to sustain growth, whereas connection is the indispensable prerequisite for survival.
For me, the contact interruption is a phenomenological evidence that supports me in my work as a Gestalt therapist.
This does not detract from the fact that I can modulate contact or develop contact styles, but this does not invalidate the fact that contact breaks exist: we are talking about two different phenomena.
Modulating is part of the operations necessary to assimilate or reject the assimilable novelty. Interruption, on the other hand, is the phenomenon resulting from the awareness that an assimilable novelty at a certain point is deemed no longer assimilable. But I am not willing to reject it, because what makes it no longer assimilable is not the awareness of another novelty emerging, but '*the ground of contacting the new figure is disturbed by the existence of the painful suppression, which is immobilizing certain of the ego-functions*' (PHG, 1951, p. 210).
An example: if the novelty in question is the desire to kiss my wife and, in approaching her, I smell an unpleasant smell on her breath, this in itself is just another emergent figure. If I were able to say: "Love… I'm sorry, but you have bad breath", there would be no interruption of contact, only a modulation. When there is a painful repression that has immobilised certain functions of the ego, what happens is that I am no longer aware that having expressed a refusal in the past has exposed me to the risk of abandonment, nor of all the work I have done subsequently to do 'something else' (*instead of*) that prevents me from directly expressing this refusal. Here, the introject: "You must not hurt the other person by rejecting him/her", will automatically lead me to retroflect the annoyance and to stiffen up: this is an interruption of contact.
This is why we also consider it incorrect to equate contact interruptions with Freudian resistance. For Freud resistance indicated a resistance to therapy, whereas for us contact interruptions signal the emergence of danger and a need for protection, i.e. a 'creative adjustment'.
The originality of Gestalt therapy is not to have developed a typology of persons – as almost all orientations have done –, but a typology of 'contact interruptions' making the "characters" (PHG writes it in inverted commas) "stages of creative adjustment at which the excitement is interrupted" (PHG, 1951, p. 228). This, by the way, explains why the word 'character' is not used in Gestalt, except in inverted commas, because character is not a normal structure, but a neurotic one which emerges when we implement a creative adjustment by blocking excitation.
In Gestalt therapy, contact is the healing experience. It is the awareness of the novelty that can be assimilated and of the necessary operations to assimilate or reject it (PHG, 1951).
If we focus on sexuality, we can appreciate how *sexual dysfunctions*, which we will see in the dedicated chapters, *speak to us of abandoned, forgotten and/or denied connections*.
Let us take anorgasmia as an example. The experience of orgasm is the most powerful experience of renouncing individual boundaries in order to experience fusion with the environment at that moment. If in my history the other is a source of danger and suffering, I will learn in my body (personality function) to deny this connection, to refuse to experience abandonment and renunciation of my boundaries. However, I will lose awareness and memory of this choice and interrupt the contact process when it leads me back to experiencing the novelty of the growing arousal in sexual intercourse with the other as an assimilable and pleasurable novelty, i.e. as a possible 'good contact'. I interrupt the contact and thus do not regain that connection which I have decided to be too dangerous. The possibility of giving up my boundaries is erased from the range of available connections. The process of contact reminds me of the danger: hence, the choice

to reject sexuality or of a contactless sexuality, i.e. repetitive, with little satisfaction or abruptly interrupted. The therapeutic work will therefore consist in helping the person to recover awareness of the danger and to discover – in the actuality of his or her life – forms of contact that will enable him/her to recognise and co-construct contexts suitable for making him/her feel safe and ways of achieving full contact that suit what he/she is now. Thus, the process of contact is at once a source of fear but also a possibility for healing and recovering the lost connection.