

Gestalt Experiments & Protocols

From EMDR Deconstructed™ Ch 7: The Gestalt of EMDR

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PROTOCOL 1

Addressing Fears About Beginning Therapy

5-Step Protocol

Starting therapy can evoke fears of judgment, overwhelm, or facing unresolved trauma. This protocol addresses those fears systematically with ABLS integration.

Step 1 ~ Identify the Fear: "What feels most frightening about starting therapy right now?" Conduct a somatic check-in to encourage embodied awareness.

Step 2 ~ Flashforward Worst-Case: Gently guide clients to visualize their worst fears while staying within their window of tolerance. Use the "Pause" tool for overwhelm.

Step 3 ~ Process with ABLS: "Bring up the scene that feels most distressing." Apply ABLS while monitoring somatic cues — shifts in breathing, muscle tension.

Step 4 ~ Adaptive Cognitions: Replace fear-based beliefs with empowering thoughts. Document on an index card and tap in with ABLS.

Step 5 ~ Future Visioning: "Imagine walking into therapy feeling calm and supported. How does your body feel?" Apply ABLS to anchor this vision.

Transforms uncertainty into confidence and self-compassion. Normalizes fears about starting therapy.

PROTOCOL 2

Addressing Fears About Ending Therapy

5-Step Protocol

Ending therapy can evoke fears of losing support or regressing. Helps clients transition confidently and integrate therapeutic gains.

Step 1 ~ Name the Fear: "What feels most difficult about ending therapy?"

Step 2 ~ Review Gains: Reflect on achievements and resources. Use ABLS to anchor: "Focus on the skills and strengths you've built."

Step 3 ~ Plan Future Support: "What support systems can you rely on going forward?"

Step 4 ~ Meaningful Closure: Writing a letter to yourself or the therapist. Creating art to symbolize progress.

Step 5 ~ Future Visioning: "See yourself applying what you've learned and handling challenges with confidence." Anchor with ABLS.

Ending therapy with intention supports clients in feeling prepared and confident in maintaining growth independently.

PROTOCOL 3

Reflecting on Previous Therapy Experiences

6-Step Protocol

Exploring past therapeutic experiences shapes a more attuned and respectful relationship in current therapy.

Step 1 ~ Positive Aspects: "What techniques felt most supportive? What therapist qualities made you feel safe?"

Step 2 ~ Challenging Aspects: "Note moments you felt dismissed or invalidated. What did you need that you didn't receive?"

Step 3 ~ Patterns to Avoid: "How will we know if I'm repeating past mistakes?"

Step 4 ~ Communication Preferences: "How do you prefer to address concerns? What would make it easier to speak up?"

Step 5 ~ Addressing Disappointments: "How might you tell me if something I say or do feels disappointing?"

Step 6 ~ Hopes: "What do you hope we create together in this therapy?" Use ABLS to process emotional responses throughout.

Co-creates a safe, effective therapeutic relationship and reduces likelihood of repeating past misattunements.

SCENARIO 4

New Client with Perceived Harm by Previous Therapist

6-Step Scenario Protocol

For clients who experienced harm in previous therapeutic relationships. Builds trust, processes unresolved distress, and empowers communication.

Step 1 ~ Preparation: Explain “safe emergency” concept. Introduce Reflecting on Past Therapy worksheet. Build resources: Grounding Self, Wise Mentor, Compassionate Observer.

Step 2 ~ Access-ment: Validate distress. “What stands out as the most difficult moment from your previous therapy?” Establish safe word (“Pause”).

Step 3 ~ Desensitization: Focus on the most painful memory while using ABLS. Monitor somatic cues.

Step 4 ~ Re-pairing: Install adaptive beliefs: “I can choose a respectful, attuned therapist.” “It’s safe to speak up if I feel hurt.”

Step 5 ~ Behavioral Rehearsal: Role-play asserting needs: “Let’s practice saying, ‘I feel unheard; can we pause and revisit?’”

Step 6 ~ Closure: Return to resources. Schedule periodic check-ins for trust-building.

Rebuilds trust and equips clients to advocate for their needs in therapy effectively.

PROTOCOL 5

Scheduled Progress Check-In Protocol

6-Step Protocol

Tracking progress helps clients recognize growth, identify challenges, and maintain motivation. ABLS reinforces insights somatically.

Step 1 ~ Frequency: “We’ll do a progress review every 2–3 sessions. We’ll keep it brief.”

Step 2 ~ Mini Timeline: “Write down one success, one challenge, and one new insight since the last check-in.”

Step 3 ~ Client-Led Tapping: “Begin tapping your collarbones for 10 seconds while reviewing this mini timeline.”

Step 4 ~ Incremental Goals: “Pick one small next step. For example: ‘I will speak up once during a group meeting.’” Tap again for 10 seconds.

Step 5 ~ Reflection: “Did recognizing progress help reduce discouragement?”

Homework: Keep a brief log of progress points between sessions. Do a short (10–20 second) tapping sequence each time you note a positive shift.

Regular check-ins paired with ABLS help clients maintain focus, recognize growth, and approach therapy with renewed confidence.

PROTOCOL 6

Safe Emergency EMDR Protocol

7-Phase Protocol

Building on Gestalt's "safe emergency" principle — uses EMDR's structured framework to help clients face therapy-related fears without becoming overwhelmed.

Phase 1 ~ Preparation: Develop imaginal resources (Protector Self, Nurturer Self, Container). Psychoeducation: discomfort is natural and manageable.

Phase 2 ~ Access-ment: "Let's explore any fears you have about beginning, continuing, or ending therapy."

Phase 3 ~ Desensitization: Use ABLS while focusing on feared images or beliefs. Monitor somatic shifts.

Phase 4 ~ Re-pairing: Install: "Therapy can be a safe space." "I can handle challenges step by step." Deepen with ABLS.

Phase 5 ~ Behavioral Rehearsal: "Imagine yourself successfully handling this moment with confidence." Anchor with ABLS.

Phase 6 ~ Closure: Grounding techniques, container imagery for residual distress.

Phase 7 ~ Recheck: "In our next session, we'll revisit these fears to see how they're feeling now."

Creates a supportive framework for exploring and processing therapy-related fears, fostering trust and self-assurance.

PROTOCOL 7

Healing Relational Wounds

Modified EMDR — 4 Steps

For clients with histories of neglect or betrayal who struggle with trust and intimacy. Integrates Gestalt's present-centered awareness with EMDR resourcing and processing.

Step 1 ~ Imaginal Dialogue: Invite the client to talk to a neglectful caregiver in a safe, imaginal space. "What would you say to this person if you could speak freely?" Observe body sensations, emotions, and thoughts.

Step 2 ~ Imaginal Reparenting: Introduce a nurturing figure or Protector Self into the painful memory. "Imagine a nurturing figure stepping in to soothe and protect you."

Step 3 ~ Integration: Use ABLS to reinforce reparative imagery and shift beliefs: "I'm unworthy of love" becomes "I deserve consistent care and respect."

Step 4 ~ Future Rehearsal: "Imagine yourself in a future relationship where you feel valued and secure. How does that feel in your body?" Anchor with ABLS.

Comprehensive approach to addressing relational wounds and fostering emotional resilience.

PROTOCOL 8

Preparing for Major Surgery

Modified EMDR — 4 Steps

Clients facing medical procedures often experience heightened fear due to past trauma or anticipated complications. Addresses both past trauma and future anxiety.

Step 1 ~ Resource Development: Create a Triumphant Self or Wise Self that embodies confidence and calm. Reinforce with ABLS.

Step 2 ~ Access/Desensitize Past Trauma: Process traumatic medical memories (hospital smells, sounds) with ABLS until distress lowers.

Step 3 ~ Flashforward: Focus on worst-case scenario (fear of complications, helplessness). Desensitize with ABLS until relief is felt.

Step 4 ~ Positive Rehearsal: Visualize going through the procedure calmly. Anchor a relaxation technique (slow breathing, key phrase) to use on surgery day.

Addresses both past and future medical anxieties, equipping clients with tools for emotional regulation and confidence.

EXPERIMENT 9

Titration Proximity for Complex Trauma

Gestalt Experiment — 6 Steps

Clients with complex trauma may experience heightened sensitivity to closeness. Gradual adjustments to physical and emotional distance build tolerance for relational contact.

Setup: Place two chairs 10–15 feet apart. “We’ll see how moving closer affects your bodily and emotional reactions.”

Instruction to Tap: Begin a short set of tapping on upper arms or use the Butterfly Hug. “This helps ground you as we start.”

Client-Led Movement: “Take one small step closer. Let’s pause and notice changes in your body or breath.” Continue intermittent tapping as needed.

Monitor Activation: “Do you need more time here, or are you ready to move another step?”

Reflection: “How do you feel at this distance? Is your tapping helping you stay in a safe range of emotion?”

Home Application: Smaller distances (5–8 feet) with a trusted person. Brief tapping sets before and during movement.

Gradual proximity adjustments, supported by ABLS, help clients feel safer and more in control in relational settings.

EXPERIMENT 10

Grounding Breath in Relational Tension

Gestalt Experiment — 5 Steps

Complex trauma often leads to hypervigilance. Pairing slow breathing with self-led ABLS helps clients regulate distress during relational tension.

Mild Trigger: "Name a small topic that's uncomfortable but not overwhelming."

Observe Breathing: "As we discuss it, notice if your breath tightens. Begin the Butterfly Hug or upper-arm tapping. Focus on each breath in and out."

Name the Experience: "Say, 'I notice my breathing is shallow,' while tapping. Does that help you breathe more fully?"

Reflection: "What does your body feel like after the tapping? Any difference in heart rate or muscle tension?"

Home Application: "Pick a daily stressor (e.g., reading a difficult email). Practice short tapping sets whenever breath constricts. Track tension levels (0–10) before and after."

Grounding breath paired with ABLS helps clients navigate relational tension with reduced hypervigilance.

EXPERIMENT 11

Posture and Self-Agency

Gestalt Experiment — 5 Steps

Long-term trauma can lead to defensive or collapsed posture (Levine, 1997). Slight posture adjustments enhance safety and control, supporting clients in reclaiming agency.

Baseline: "Say, 'I'm present right now,' in your usual posture."

Adjust Posture: "Straighten your spine, align your head over your shoulders, and say it again. If you feel any anxiety creeping in, begin tapping your upper arms."

Observe Sensations: "Is your voice stronger? Are you more or less tense?"

Reflection: "What does posture tell you about feeling safe or visible?"

Home Application: "In daily tasks, like making a phone call, stand or sit upright. Do a short set of collarbone taps if tension emerges."

Posture awareness paired with ABLS helps clients reclaim agency and enhance feelings of safety and control.

EXPERIMENT 12

Expressing Needs and Boundaries

Gestalt Experiment — 5 Steps

Clients with complex trauma often suppress needs due to fear of conflict or rejection (Herman, 2015). Supporting clients in safely voicing needs fosters self-advocacy.

Identify a Need: "Consider a small request or boundary you've been reluctant to share."

Body Scan and Tapping: "Scan your body for any tension in your jaw, neck, or stomach. Start a short tapping sequence on your collarbones."

Voice the Need: "Say, 'I need ____.' Pause and see if your breath changes. Continue tapping as needed."

Discussion: "Did tapping help you stay steady? How might you use this skill in real-life settings?"

Home Application: "Practice with a trusted friend or family member. If tension arises, do 10–15 seconds of Butterfly Hug before speaking."

Expressing needs and boundaries, supported by ABLS, empowers clients to advocate for themselves in relational contexts.

References: Buber (1970) I and Thou; Herman (2015) Trauma and Recovery; Kepner (1987) Body Process; Levine (1997) Waking the Tiger; Perls (1969) Gestalt Therapy Verbatim
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