

## Gestalt Therapy Shibboleths: Anxiety is

*Note for 2024- this has been edited and clarified from an older (2010) blog.*

**Anxiety is excitement without breathing... really?**

**A Gestalt body psychotherapist (finally!) responds... with pictures!**

*Shibboleth*: 1 a: a word or saying used by adherents of a party, sect, or belief and usually regarded by others as empty of real meaning — Joseph Epstein>  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shibboleth>

### **Gestalt Shibboleths**

Fritz Perls, the main founder and showman of Gestalt therapy, was a great sloganeer. He gave early adherents of the Gestalt approach many pithy, overly simplistic, but memorable bumper-sticker phrases. These bumper-stickers highlighted the unique view that Gestalt therapy was trying to bring to the overly intellectualized psychoanalytic view Gestalt therapy was reacting to, but they have themselves become shibboleths, empty of meaning. They hang onto our thinking and training like a bad smell whose source one can't quite locate, preventing one from more cogent thinking.

One such notion put forward early in Gestalt therapy, especially bothersome to me as a body-oriented therapist, is that *anxiety is excitement without breathing*. The notion is that if you encourage an anxious person to breathe, the anxiety will convert into *excitement*, the natural feeling of energy mobilized towards novelty and growth. In other words, anxiety is seen as suppressed excitement.

A participant in one of my workshops recently asked me about this "principle." I was surprised that this notion is still being floated in Gestalt training circles, hence my interest in detailing my view here.

As a somatically based therapist, there were so many things wrong with this slogan. Where to begin? Items...

1. It gave a singular and wrong explanation for anxiety.
2. It didn't reflect the body process of anxiety I observed.

3. It reinforced a view that the client didn't have anything real to be anxious about but was somehow foolishly avoiding the growthful goodness of excitement.
4. It didn't fit with what I experienced in my struggles with anxiety disorder
5. It wasn't useful in working with clients.

Besides all that, it's just dandy... not!

### **The function of diminishing breathing**

Is there a link between diminished breathing and anxiety? Sure, but you have to understand how breathing functions in our psychophysiology to appreciate just how experimenting with breathing changes the experience of anxiety.

Diminishing our breathing has an immediate effect on diminishing our overall body sensation. This function is built into our nervous system and is seen most starkly in the startle reaction.

When you hear an unexpected noise at night, you will momentarily hold your breath, freeze your body, and focus all your attention on listening for sounds. Holding your breath and freezing your movement dampens down your *internal* sensations so that the *external* stimuli of the sound can be more acutely perceived. Information engineers call this improving the signal-to-noise ratio. The signal, the sound we hear, is now louder relative to our internal sensations.

This is why, similarly, when you ask a client to attend to what's going on in their body, they often automatically stop breathing in response. Not because it's a defense but because it is a *natural* response to limit the larger "noise" of body movements to discern the subtler signals of affect and other internal sensations. But this natural, automatic response has a paradoxical impact because, as I noted, diminishing ongoing breathing, *even momentarily*, also diminishes the intensity of our internal body sensation, the very thing we have just asked them to attend to, quite significantly. This mechanism of diminishing breathing, so useful when we are trying to attend to *external* stimuli, is just the wrong thing to support attending to *internal* stimuli.

### **Two Principles of Breathing and Body Sensation**

So now we have two useful somatic principles relating to breathing and body sensation.

On-going breathing supports awareness of body sensation.  
 Stopping or diminishing breathing dampens or curtails body sensation.

To support awareness and attention to body sensation, we have to coach the client to maintain ongoing breathing. We do this by making sure that, first, we, the therapist, are doing this ourselves. I always tell my students that if there is going to be only one person breathing in the consulting room, it should be the therapist. And then, by coaching our clients in unobtrusive ways: "As you pay attention to your body, just keep breathing in and out... keep breathing as you feel into yourself... etc."

Ah, some simple principles. Don't we feel better now? Just keep breathing, and we'll get through this...

And since, from a phenomenological and somatic point of view, affects (feelings) are essentially a type of body sensation, managing our breathing is also a *sine qua non*, the most immediate way we manage our emotions, in other words, feelings are fundamentally bodily events.

### **Making "I" Into "It"**

Another somatic process available to us to manage feelings that are unsupportable (overwhelming, forbidden, would have intolerable consequences concerning others, etc.) is what has been called *disowning* them or *dis-identifying* with them in Gestalt therapy. Although this sounds like a mental process, as related to feelings, it is very much grounded in our somatic nature.

Working with subtle energy, it has become apparent to me that this thing we call "awareness" is not just an aspect of our subjective experience but is also accompanied by energetic processes. Specifically, when someone is present and aware and feeling they are *in* their body, there is a palpable quality of energy that can be sensed in the tissue. This that can be felt easily with a little training. This is different from being aware *of* one's body since we can have "signal-from-a-distance," as I call it, without being especially *in* the places the signal is coming from.

Now, here's the interesting part as far as our discussion goes: we tend to experience body areas where awareness is in as "I," and the parts where awareness is not as "It" (i.e., as an object), even though we have sensation.

So, one way we disconnect from feelings that can't be supported is to withdraw our energy of awareness from the body areas where we experience the sensations of that feeling.

Since many feelings are felt subjectively to originate or locate in our torso-- sadness in our hearts, fear in our gut, anger in our belly-- it is not uncommon to see that clients have habitually drawn much of their energy and awareness up into their head. Much of their insides are experienced as "down there" from the perspective of the head where "I" is located, the rest of the body is now experienced as an "it" rather than an "I." The sense of "I" becomes identified with the act of thinking, the main sensation in the head where "I" is located, and sensations of the body are felt but as "things which happen down there." (Figure 1)

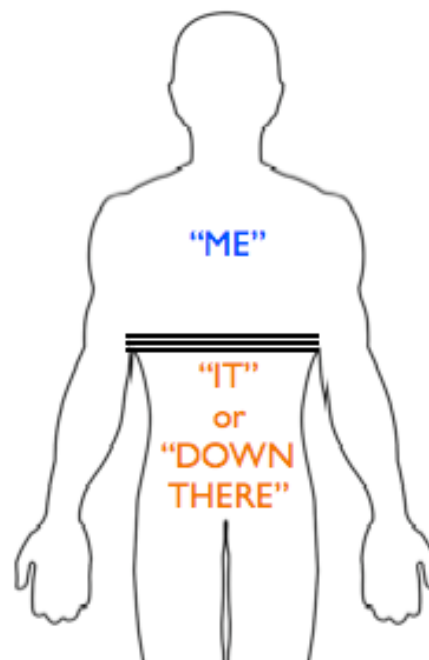


Figure 1- Me & It Down-There

### Once Again, With Feelings- why feelings "arise"

Emotion, from the Latin "to move outwards," has a place in our body where it originates, a direction of movement through the body, and a place where it is expressed to the environment. I call this the *pathway of expression*. Many feelings originate in the visceral core of the body, and their pathway of movement is "up," i.e., through the torso. So feelings such as joy, anger, or sadness are experienced as "rising," that is, their pathway originates "below" in the torso and tends to move upward towards our throat to be voiced and our face to be shown and expressed. (Figure 2)

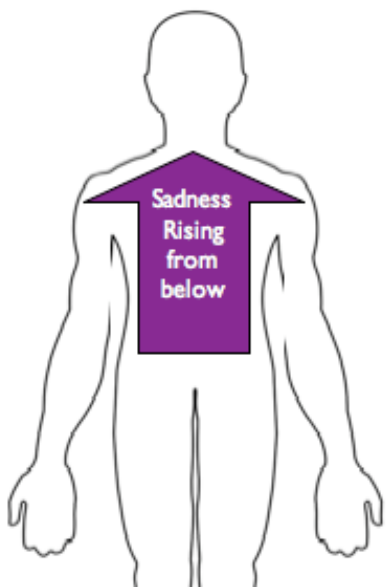


Figure 2- Sadness rising from "below" (visceral sensation)

stimulated by circumstances and begins to "rise" in us? Especially when the usual means of diminished breathing, tightening muscles (retroflexion), and other creative adjustments don't work to stop the feeling from arising?

### Funny you should ask...

When an emotion or feeling that we have had to reject, and thus has been subjectively relegated to "it," begins to "arise from below," we first withdraw further "up" and away from it (**Figure 3**). Since the initial sensations are mostly subliminal, we don't feel the initial emotional quality but rather only the sense of emergency that something bad is occurring: unknown, foreign, and out of control.

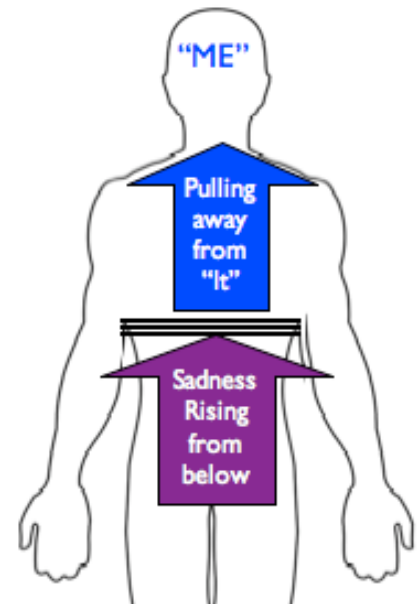


Figure 3- Feeling held below diaphragm & pulling away

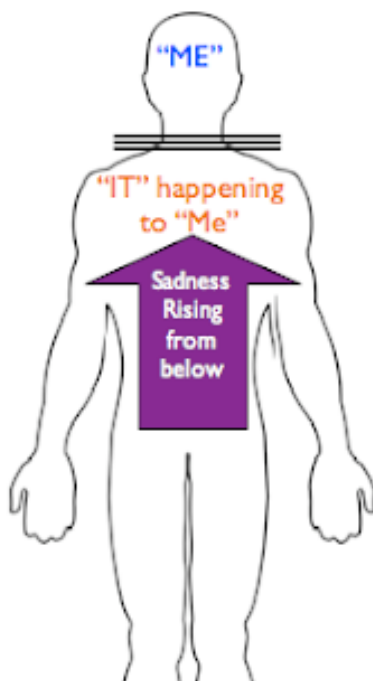


Figure 4-Head identified as "Me," all else "It"

This is why people report anxiety as something that happens to them:

"It just happens,"

"It feels like the anxiety just takes me over,"

"It comes from nowhere."

In other words, instead of experiencing the *original feeling as it is*, we experience our reaction to it, which is that some awful (rejected, forbidden, dangerous, etc.) thing is going to overwhelm the "I." We withdraw our awareness further upwards, away from the rising feeling, and experience the fear of something bad happening rather than the original feeling (**Figure 4**). In more extreme cases, we numb enough that the body below feels disconnected, and we feel dissociated and floating above "It." (**Figure 5**).

### What's breath got to do with it?

Remember, how breath relates to all this is that it is the *“how”* of reducing sensation (desensitization,) *not the how of anxiety!*

Diminishing breathing is the most immediate way we dampen *any* body sensation. Since emotions are “felt” as located in body sensations (visceral, muscular, and kinesthetic sensations), restricting breathing will function as a creative adjustment to diminish the sensations of anxiety as it does for any other emotional sensation, such as in sadness, anger, longing, shame and so on.

Three natural responses result:

1. A feeling we've fear (are disconnected from) begins to arise.
2. We diminish breathing to dampen sensation and tighten muscularly to diminish movement and thus the flow of energy and expression.
3. We pull away from things that we are afraid of. Since we are trying to pull away from here a feeling arising *inside* our own body, we do this by pulling our awareness, breath, and energy upwards into our upper torso or head.
4. We that something “bad” happening *to* us, as if from outside the self.

So now, finally, we can reformulate the misleading bumper sticker we started with (...*anxiety is excitement without breathing...*) and look at the problem as a body therapist might:

***Anxiety is the felt emergency response to a feeling rising in the body from which we have disconnected via diminished breathing, muscular tension, and withdrawal of awareness, energy, and sense of ownership.***

That feeling *could* be excitement, but it is more likely sadness, loss, loneliness, anger, shame, or other seriously problematic feelings.

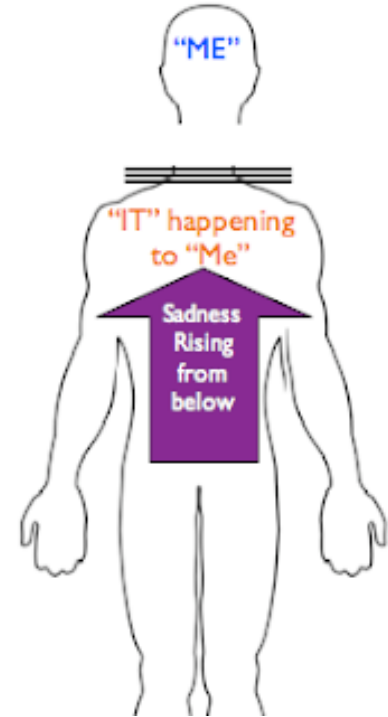


Figure 5- Floating above body

The processes by which we maintain disconnection from, and suppression of, the feeling are fundamentally somatic ones, and we see these become more emphasized and exaggerated when the feeling is somehow triggered or stimulated by circumstances:

**Original article was from <http://bodyprocess.blogspot.com/2010/06/gestalt-therapy-shibboleths-anxiety-is.html?view=classic>**

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