

ZEIGARNIK EFFECT

Zeigarnik effect: the tendency for unfinished tasks to be recalled better and more often than finished ones.

Discussion:

Research by Zeigarnik showed that interruption of an activity creates a tension-charged system, which leads subjects to remember and keep returning to the task until it is completed. Upon completion there is a release of that tension, which brings closure. (Zeigarnik 1927, in Ellis, 1997, Mazur, 1996)

Fritz Perls integrated the results of this research into his concepts of unfinished business and closure. Therapists often see this in adults who, as children, did not get the love and attention they needed from a parent. These individuals may obsessively and futilely seek that love and attention from their still unresponsive parent. In therapy the task is to help them either understand or forgive that parent and/or let go of their unfulfillable need, so they can move on to more satisfying and productive relationships.

Illustrative Quotations:

• **Mazur:** “The Zeigarnik effect has shown that interruption will lead the individual to remember and return meaningfully to the unfinished business. Likewise, in Gestalt therapy, there is recognition that individuals have a tendency to return to and dwell upon incomplete experiences and to carry unresolved emotions. ...one way in which the individual attempts to assimilate and complete important unfinished business is to bring it up over and over again.” (1996, 21)

• **Köhler:** “The following experience is quite common: I have a task which, perhaps, I do not like, but which is urgent. In the course of the day, however, I find myself occupied with many other things. I talk with friends, I read a book, and so forth. But time and again something like a pressure makes itself felt in my interior, and upon examination this pressure proves to issue from that task. The pressure amounts to a persistent tendency of the task to be recalled, and thus to enter into the present field of action.” (1947/1975, 178)

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