

CENTER

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Neurophysiology; Holistic Psychology; Existential Phenomenology

1. Core Definition and Dual Meanings

The concept of the **Center** holds a powerful duality, serving as both a concrete neuroanatomical descriptor and an abstract psychological state of optimum functioning. In the physical sciences, particularly **neurophysiology**, a center refers explicitly to a specialized structure or defined region within the body--often in the central nervous system--that is primarily responsible for the execution, integration, or control of a specific, vital physiological function. Examples include the respiratory center in the brainstem or the visual processing centers in the occipital lobe. These centers represent localized hubs of control necessary for maintaining homeostasis and executing complex motor or sensory tasks.

Conversely, in **holistic psychology** and existential thought, the Center describes a dynamic psychological state of being. This state is characterized by profound internal balance, optimal integration of all bodily and psychic functions, and a harmonious relationship with the external environment. This definition moves beyond localization and instead focuses on the organism's overall mode of existence. To be "at center" implies an organism is maximizing its potential for adaptation and efficient engagement with reality, minimizing internal conflict, and operating coherently as an integrated whole.

The distinction between these two meanings is crucial for academic clarity: one is fundamentally reductionist and structural (the physical location of control), while the other is fundamentally holistic and functional (the qualitative experience of integrated existence). Both meanings, however, emphasize the necessity of a locus--be it physical or metaphorical--for effective control and regulation.

2. The Neurological Center

Within the domain of anatomy and neurobiology, the term **Center** signifies areas of concentrated neural activity designated for particular regulatory roles. These centers are not merely passive relay stations; they are complex processing units essential for maintaining life-sustaining functions and coordinating sophisticated behaviors. They often contain specific neuronal populations that receive inputs from various parts of the body and environment, process this information, and generate appropriate outputs via efferent pathways.

A classic example is the vasomotor center located in the medulla oblongata, which regulates blood pressure through control of vasoconstriction and vasodilation. Damage to such a center typically results in severe functional impairment or death, underscoring its critical role as a dedicated control

hub. The precise mapping of these centers, facilitated by techniques like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and lesion studies, forms the basis of much of clinical neurology, allowing practitioners to localize damage based on observed functional deficits.

The study of neurological centers highlights the modular nature of the brain, where specialized regions are entrusted with specific tasks. While modern neuroscience acknowledges that complex functions are distributed across networks rather than confined to single centers, the concept remains highly relevant for describing the primary anatomical regions where specific regulatory functions are concentrated.

3. Kurt Goldstein and the Organismic Approach

The psychological definition of the Center was most prominently defined by the German-American neurologist and psychiatrist **Kurt Goldstein** (1878-1965). Goldstein developed the **Organismic Theory**, which views the human being not as a collection of separate reflexes, parts, or drives, but as an indivisible, self-regulating entity whose primary motivation is a drive toward self-actualization-the realization of its inherent potential. His work was heavily influenced by his observations of brain-damaged soldiers during World War I, noting that injuries did not merely remove a function but forced the entire organism to reorganize around the deficit.

Goldstein proposed that the organism strives for a state of equilibrium, not merely static balance, but a dynamic capacity for adjusting to environmental demands while maintaining internal consistency. The state of being "at center" represents this optimal organizational condition. It is the condition under which the organism is most capable of managing its internal resources efficiently and dealing with external challenges without succumbing to the disorganization he termed the "catastrophic reaction."

In Goldstein's framework, the Center is synonymous with the organism's ability to function as a unified whole. When a person is centered, they are free from internal conflicts and distortions, allowing them to engage reality in the most pragmatic and efficient manner possible. This concept provided a fundamental theoretical pillar for later schools of thought, particularly **Humanistic Psychology**, which embraced the concepts of wholeness and inherent growth potential.

4. Characteristics of Being "At Center"

Goldstein's definition of being "at center" is descriptive of an organism operating at peak psychological and physiological effectiveness. This state is not one of stasis or relaxation, but rather one of readiness and accurate engagement. The key characteristics relate directly to how the individual perceives, processes, and responds to the world.

A centrally positioned individual exhibits a high degree of **integration**, meaning that all their drives,

emotions, and thoughts are working cohesively toward a single purpose defined by the situation. They are able to distinguish clearly between the essential and the inessential, ensuring that their actions are purposeful and targeted. Furthermore, the capacity for realistic assessment of the environment is paramount; the centered person is neither overly optimistic nor pessimistically distorted in their view of their immediate circumstances or capabilities.

The ultimate goal of this centered state is optimal **efficiency** and successful navigation of life's demands. As defined by the source material, a person who is at center places himself or herself in a position to meet life in the most realistic and efficient manner. This efficiency is reflected in minimal wasted effort, reduced internal stress, and a maximized potential for self-actualization and productive engagement with the world.

5. Implications for Adaptation and Function

The concept of the Center carries significant implications for understanding health, illness, and therapeutic intervention. Goldstein argued that neurological damage or severe psychological trauma forces the organism away from its natural centered state, leading to attempts to cope through rigid, defensive, or fragmented behaviors--the catastrophic reaction. This reaction is the organism's failure to organize its resources effectively when confronted by a challenge it cannot meet with its current capacity.

In therapy derived from organismic principles, the goal is often to help the individual restore their centered state. This involves moving the person away from defensive abstractions and rigidities, and back toward concrete, immediate, and realistic contact with the environment. Successful adaptation, therefore, is not merely the absence of symptoms, but the active reorganization toward a holistic, integrated, and centered mode of functioning, allowing the individual to transcend previous limitations imposed by injury or distress.

6. Key Components of the Centered State

Internal Balance (Equilibrium): Not a fixed state, but a dynamic, flexible balance where physiological and psychological processes are harmonized, ready to shift instantly to meet new demands.

Environmental Integration: The organism is capable of accurately perceiving and appropriately responding to the external world, free from self-imposed or defensive perceptual biases.

Efficient Action: Behavior is economical and purposeful, reflecting a maximization of resources toward goal attainment and minimizing energy expenditure on internal conflict or unnecessary anxiety.

Absence of Catastrophic Reaction: The ability to confront anxiety, novelty, and failure without collapsing into a state of panic, fragmentation, or complete disorganization, maintaining the

integrity of the self.

7. Critiques and Modern Applications

While the neurophysiological definition of the Center remains fundamental to anatomical mapping, the psychological concept proposed by Goldstein often faces critique from reductionist perspectives. Critics argue that holistic concepts like "perfect integration" or "balance" are difficult to measure empirically and may be overly philosophical or phenomenological rather than scientifically testable. Furthermore, some modern neuroscientists argue that focusing on a single "center" oversimplifies the highly interconnected and distributed nature of brain networks that control complex functions.

Despite these methodological criticisms, the concept of the Center has been enormously influential in clinical practice. It forms a theoretical foundation for several important therapeutic modalities, including **Gestalt therapy**, which emphasizes present moment awareness and the integration of fragmented aspects of the self, and certain somatic and body-centered therapies focused on restoring physical and psychological alignment. In these fields, being centered serves as the benchmark for mental health and psychological maturity.

Contemporary applications often merge the concepts; for instance, in rehabilitation following brain injury, the objective is not just to repair the anatomical center but to re-integrate the patient's entire organism (physical, cognitive, and emotional) back into a centered state of efficient, realistic engagement with their altered capacities and environment. The enduring power of the concept lies in its ability to articulate a state of optimal human functioning across disciplines, from cellular regulation to existential well-being.

Further Reading

[Kurt Goldstein \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Organismic Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Neurophysiology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Holistic psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)