
'FOCUSSING' IN THERAPY: 'FOCUSSING' IN LIFE

by

Jonathon Hales-Tooke

I feel uncomfortable about a meeting that I'm due to go to. I have a definite sense of uneasiness. It's clear to me that I feel **something**, but it's not clear what the feeling is. It feels bad, whatever it is. At first I try to 'think out' what the feeling might be. I try to explain it to myself. But the explanations don't feel real. I don't have that satisfying sense of 'Yes, that's it, I've got it'.

So I decide to 'stay with' the uneasy feeling itself. I try not to go off into thoughts and ideas. I try to 'hang out' with the feeling in a non-judgemental way. I try to make an 'open space' in which the feeling can be and I can attend to it. I ask myself, 'What is this uneasy, unclear feeling?' I try not to answer the question with my head. I wait to see what comes to me. Nothing happens for a while. I try to notice whether I feel the feeling in a particular part of my body. I decide that it's sort of in my stomach. I ask myself whether I can find words to describe it. What occurs to me is the phrase 'pressing down'. I say to myself, 'It's like a 'pressing down feeling, there in my stomach'.

This seems like a forward step. I feel that I've got a bit more to go on. Things are a little bit clearer. I say to myself 'OK, this pressing down feeling, how does it relate to the meeting? What's so 'pressing down' about it? What comes up then is a sense of being overwhelmed, of being swallowed up in something bigger than me. I get a mental picture of a large parachute that is tangled around me, cords and all. **That's** what the meeting feels like.

I get a definite feeling of 'phew, that's it!' I feel something inside me being released, something moving on. In rapid succession a number of thoughts come to me. I think about how I often seem to end up in situations where whatever you do, it's never enough. My previous job was like that. I think about how beaten I feel in such situations, and I feel some of that. It's as if there were nothing solid under my feet. How much more comfortable I feel when there is a discrete task to be done. I can do it, take pride in that and move onto the next thing. I feel competent, and on top of things. What feels wrong about the meeting is

that it unreatens to present me with a nebulous string of demands, with no clear end in sight, and I'm afraid of getting lost along the way.

Having gone through this (which has taken me about ten minutes) I feel a lot better. The problem hasn't gone away. I still feel obliged to go to the meeting, and the issue of unending demands is still there. But somehow I feel better about it. I no longer have the uneasy tension inside my body 'pressing down'. Its almost as if I've taken note of the problem, and it has moved on a bit. The problem is still there, but there has been some change. I feel that I have a bit more 'space for other things.

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The process I have described is what Eugene Gendlin calls 'Focusing on the inwardly-felt sense of a problem' or, more simply 'Focusing'. (1) My inescapably present, yet unclear, feeling is what Gendlin calls a 'felt sense'. When I thought about the meeting I was aware of my unclear felt sense. When I attended to it, and located it in my body, it became clearer. As I continued to attend to it, I found words to describe the 'feeling quality' of it, and I found that it opened out into a sense of what the meeting meant to me. What started as a feeling in my body turned into a sense of personal meaning.

Gendlin points out (2) that when we (lay people and therapists alike) talk about 'feelings', we mean different things. We mean one of two things when we say 'I have a feeling'. One kind of 'feeling' is where we say 'I feel angry' or, 'I feel sad'. This is 'feeling' as an 'emotion'. But there is another kind of 'feeling' that I believe is given less attention. This other type of feeling is where we say. 'I feel uneasy about this' or 'this gives me a strange feeling'. Here, by 'feeling' we mean 'a feeling sense of something-yet-to-be-understood'. We are aware of a bodily sensation (a feeling), but there is also a hint that it means something (although we don't know what). This kind of 'feeling' is almost what we mean by 'intuition', and it is this that Gendlin calls the 'felt sense'.

Whatever situation we are in, whatever problem confronts us, we always have inside us a felt sense of (about, in relation to) that situation. We may not realise that it's there, but if we turn our attention inwards, there it is. Alongside this felt sense we may also have feelings in the sense of 'emotions'. The situation may make us feel happy, angry or sad. But the felt sense is somehow 'wider' than any emotion, because it points towards the meaning that the situation has for us as a whole.

The felt sense is also 'lighter' to experience than strong or painful emotions. However it is generally less clear, less easy to perceive.

A person may need to be encouraged to look beyond the emotion to see 'What else is there', before they can get in touch with the felt sense. With some people, it even helps to say explicitly 'I'm not going to ask you to go into or talk about painful feelings'.

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Focusing began as part of Client-Centred Therapy. Eugene Gendlin was one of Carl Rogers' graduate students at the University of Chicago in the mid-1950's. His ideas inspired Rogers to write 'A Process Conception of Psychotherapy' (3), which was a key step in the development of Client-Centred Therapy. However, Focusing goes beyond client-centred practice as it is traditionally understood: in Focusing there is a more active pursuit of the person's felt sense.

Focusing, in the context of therapy, happens when one person helps another person get in touch with their felt sense of a problem or situation. The help that is needed is different at different times (1). The simplest way of helping is that you listen attentively to the person, and you say back to them some of the felt, personal things in what they are saying. This is the same as in client-centred practice. However, this in itself may not be enough. It may be that the person talks quickly, moving from one thing to another, and not staying with any one thing long enough to actually 'go into' the feeling of it. They don't give their felt sense the time and attention that is needed for it to develop and be noticed. If this

happens, then in Focusing, you may find Focusing is more specific than you are in Client-Centred Therapy. You say to the person something like 'Hold on a moment! Can you stay with the last thing you said? Is there a feeling that goes with that? Can you take a minute to see what more is in it?' In Focusing you are keen to make a pause, in which the felt sense has sufficient time and attention to develop.

The other way in which Focusing is more specific than Client-Centred Therapy is that the person is given some ideas of **where** to look for their felt sense. Many people in counselling and therapy stay on the 'thinking about' level, and find it hard to move down into their 'feelings of' level. In Focusing such people are gently told 'try not to work this out with your head. Wait and see what comes in the place where you feel things'. If I'm listening to somebody and they are having trouble getting in touch with their felt sense, I may say 'try gently asking yourself this question, 'What is this?' Then wait and see what comes to you.' What is stressed is that you don't try to think it out, you try to let it come from the felt sense itself.

Focusing is generally taught to people in groups, and over the years a number of specific teaching steps have been devised. Having learnt Focusing in this way, I now find that I can use particular aspects of it in my counselling work, as I have described. I like the Focusing approach, both for myself and for when I'm listening to another person. I like the way it

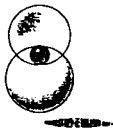
insists that you don't mix in any of your own stuff to what is there for the other person. (In my experience of therapy, this is extremely rare.) I like the respect it shows for the person's own individual meaning (and this is a beautiful thing to receive.) I like the way it gently but firmly pulls people back, if they are in danger of rushing past their felt sense and never getting there. I like the way it offers people some guide-lines,

some hints about where to look. After all, it's not easy contacting one's inner feelings. Finally I like the way that there is a certain lightness about Focusing. It's not the same as going down into painful feelings, and going round and round there. (I think that therapy can too often become an exercise in self-punishment) The felt sense is easier to have, and generally moves towards release and forward movement.

Jonathon Hales-Tooke works as a counsellor at Croydon College. He is particularly interested in teaching listening skills to community groups, and is exploring the route from listening skills into Focusing. He would like to thank David Garlovsky for his help in learning Focusing.

References

- 1 Eugene Gendlin. 'Focusing' Bantam paperback, 1981.
 - 2 Eugene Gendlin, 'Experiential Phenomenology' in M Natanson (Ed) Phenomenology and the Social Sciences'. Evanston, I U : Northwestern University Press, 1973
 - 3 Carl Rogers, 'A Process Conception of Psychotherapy' in 'On Becoming a Person' Constable 1967
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