

Special Edition on

Focusing

Introduction - **Focusing**

Susan Jordan

A good many people have heard of Focusing without knowing exactly what it is. Until recently there were only a handful of Focusing teachers in this country and a few groups practising Focusing together, but in the last few years Focusing has begun to grow as people have realised how much it has to offer. It is gentle, creative and often profound, and is a safe way of being with any experience, even the most disturbed and disturbing. It is based in an ability that most of us have, or can develop – that of listening to what our subtle inner feelings are telling us. What we find when we do so is usually fresh, new, surprising, and deeply satisfying: being with even the most terrible feelings in a Focusing way can actually feel good. Or, if we are Focusing with something 'out there', a problem or difficulty may start to shift of its own accord in a direction that we haven't expected.

Focusing is not psychotherapy – though it may be used within therapy – and does not require a trained professional. It is a skill that can be practised, either alone or in a partnership, by anyone who has learnt it. It can be used in whatever way the Focuser wishes, as often or as seldom as you need. In a Focusing session the Focuser is completely in charge of their own process. People can Focus with one another on the phone as well as in person, and you can Focus with different companions. As in co-counselling, Focusing partners normally take turns at Focusing themselves and listening to someone else. Focusing partnerships can offer a unique kind of support, a space in which people relate to their own, and each other's, deepest process with both naturalness and respect.

What is Focusing?

As is well known, Focusing was first 'discovered' (or perhaps identified) in the 1950s by Eugene Gendlin, a philosopher and psychotherapist, during his research with Carl Rogers into what made psychotherapy effective. The conclusion he came to was that those who benefited most from therapy had the ability to sense

vague, still unformed feelings in their body and connect this sensing (which he names the 'felt sense') with words and images that described it. This meant being able to discover what was not yet fully known, which in itself could allow the process to move forward. He noticed that during the process there would often be an opening or release in the body, perhaps accompanied by a sigh, and this he described as a 'felt shift'.

Gendlin realised that those clients who could relate to their experience in this way already had access to a particular skill. What he came to call Focusing was developed as a means of teaching this skill to people who did not access it so easily. He initially formulated the Focusing process as a series of six steps: clearing a space, locating a felt sense, finding a 'handle' (a way of describing the felt sense), resonating the handle with the felt sense to see whether it fits, asking 'What makes this issue/feeling so.....?', and finally receiving the shift if it comes. Clearly it is helpful if and when a Focuser experiences a felt shift, but experiencing a felt shift is not the goal of Focusing. The process remains open-ended, and even if a Focuser starts out by sensing into a particular problem he or she may end up in a very different place.

Although the description of these steps is highly specific, Gendlin was aware that essentially Focusing is a universal human activity rather than a set of techniques. As Focusing has evolved other teachers have found their own models, which may prove useful or may be discarded or re-formulated if they

do not fit. One of Rob Foxcroft's formulations has five stages – deciding, inviting, befriending, wondering, returning – while another describes the process differently again. Barbara McGavin and Ann Weiser Cornell, who have developed Inner Relationship Focusing, have defined Focusing simply as sensing a [bodily] response [to something], symbolizing that response, and sensing whether the symbolization fits. ('Symbolizing' is the same as 'finding a handle'.)

Barbara McGavin and Ann Weiser Cornell also give a more concrete description of the stages: sensing into the body, sensing for what needs attention, coming into relationship with what's there, deepening relationship, and coming out. What needs attention is nearly always seen as 'something in me' or 'a part of me' rather than simply 'me'. Inner Relationship Focusing puts particular emphasis on the way that the Focuser's larger awareness, often described as 'Presence', can make a compassionate, accepting relationship with the different 'parts' or 'somethings', without itself becoming them. Similarly BioSpiritual Focusing, developed by Roman Catholic priests Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahan, talks of Caring Feeling Presence and its ability to welcome whatever is there with kindness and acceptance.

Applications of Focusing

Both these strands of Focusing have developed from Gendlin's original model, as have the many different applications of Focusing. For Gendlin the philosopher, one important area

where Focusing can be applied is that of thinking. *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* explores the notion of 'felt meaning' and the way in which any thought, however abstract, is still sensed non-verbally in some way. Gendlin has developed a body of theory and practice, known as Thinking at the Edge, which enables people to tap into the felt sense of thoughts which are as yet beyond our conscious knowledge, meeting the creative edge and allowing what is new to take form.

Other practitioners such as Josiah Hincks are using Focusing in a similar way to enable people to work more effectively with their own creative process. As with Focusing and thinking, the emphasis is on the activity rather than personal development as an end in itself. However, there are also many practitioners working with Focusing in therapeutic fields such as art therapy, sandplay, and dance and movement. Focusing can enrich other ways of working and make them more meaningful. As the articles in this issue show, the basic process of sensing into the body for what is needing to form and symbolizing it in a way that fits can be applied to almost any area of life, from financial investment to environmental conservation to cooking a meal. And it is not confined to a particular culture. Recently, for instance, American Focusing teachers have been helping people in Afghanistan to come to terms with some of their experiences of the war.

Can anyone learn Focusing?

In principle Focusing is something that is available to everyone. If someone is interested in learning it, then even if it is difficult to begin with and progress seems slow, they will find they get something from it. As with many practices, what works best is an open-minded approach: an 'interested curiosity'. If someone is looking to Focusing just to help them get rid of a troublesome feeling or an uncomfortable symptom, it may be more difficult to explore what Focusing has to offer. If, however, they are willing to trust that **something** may

happen, the outcome of which is unknown, they may well find – as with therapy and meditation – that unexpected changes do take place.

People vary widely in their ability to sense into the body. Some people are 'natural Focusers', while for others the whole idea seems at first foreign and difficult to grasp, especially if the way in which it is presented does not speak to them. Sometimes someone's experience of pain and trauma has left them dissociated from their body, perhaps with deep fears of what they may find there; or, for other reasons which are not so clear, a person may simply not be very sensitive to their own inner process. Having preconceived ideas and expectations of what Focusing ought to be can also be a difficulty, in that someone will tend

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to discount what is going on and may give up because nothing seems to be happening. Or, at the other extreme, someone may be so overwhelmed by painful feelings that for the time being it is not possible to sense into them, in which case psychotherapy which enables them to dip in and out of body sensing may be a more useful starting point than a 'pure' Focusing session.

Some Misconceptions about Focusing

Because the name is ambiguous, Focusing is sometimes thought to be a technique for 'becoming more focussed' on a particular task or aim. 'Focusing' is usually spelt with one 's' and given a capital letter to distinguish it from other kinds of

focussing. Gendlin's use of the word in fact refers to the way in which something at first fuzzy and unclear gradually becomes clearer, as if one is focussing a camera. As this happens the Focuser may stay focussed on the same 'something' or may move on to something else, depending on the momentum of the process. There is no requirement to be with something for the whole of a Focusing session, and a Focuser learns for her/himself when it is helpful to stay longer with a particular felt sense and when the process needs to move on.

Focusing has also been seen as a therapy that someone undergoes.

People sometimes talk about 'being Focused' by a partner or practitioner, but it is essential to Focusing that the process belongs to the Focuser and is entirely in her/his control. Focusing encourages people to take responsibility for themselves in a reciprocal partnership, where each person Focuses and listens in turn. Someone may of course choose to book a non-reciprocal session with a practitioner, but this does not imply that the practitioner is offering anything more 'therapeutic' in a Focusing session than a non-professional partner could.

An intense voyage into one's inner world, either with a companion or alone

Although Focusing works with feeling at a profound level, it does not necessarily involve **expressing** feelings. In older humanistic models there was often an assumption that the client needed to

become totally immersed in the feelings in order to express them as fully as possible. While Focusing certainly does not exclude expression, the emphasis is on 'sensing into it' rather than 'getting it out'. 'It' will then let the Focuser know whether and in what way it wants to be expressed. Rather than presupposing that one can already identify the feeling – for instance 'I'm ANGRY!!!' – Focusing takes time to sense more precisely into its particular quality and to get alongside it. This involves moving into the wider, containing space of Presence. To quote Gendlin, 'If you want to smell the soup, you don't stick your head in it'. In this particular case, as you sense the

'anger' it may turn out to be irritation, frustration, annoyance, fury and/or a whole host of other shades of feeling, sensation and emotion, some of which may not be anger at all.

Focusing and Psychotherapy

As I have shown, the applications of Focusing are much wider than the 'therapeutic' alone. Nevertheless, for many people Focusing remains primarily a tool for personal growth and exploration, either in its own right or in the context of psychotherapy. Focusing on its own is not sufficient to help many people who come to psychotherapy, where working in and through relationship

provides a kind of holding that Focusing does not offer. A Focusing session is an intense voyage into one's inner world, either with a companion or alone; in a psychotherapy session the inner voyage is held in a wider context, and being there with another person is equally important. Ann Weiser Cornell describes the differences very clearly. Despite Gendlin's research, my experience is that people who do not readily access the felt sense can still benefit a great deal from psychotherapy and in time may well learn to touch into their own inner sensing, particularly when the therapist holds the work in a Focusing way.

Within psychotherapy Focusing can be an extremely important means of connecting with experience. Some approaches, such as Core Process - in which I trained - see felt sensing as an integral part of the process for both therapist and client, while increasingly others are learning to incorporate Focusing as an experiential tool. In *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*

Gendlin describes in detail ways in which a psychotherapist of any school can bring Focusing into the work. More recently Campbell Purton, who has set up a course in Focusing-oriented psychotherapy at the University of East Anglia, has described using a Focusing approach within person-centred therapy. Peter Levine's work with shock and trauma

relies on Focusing to ground experiences in the body and re-integrate them as a whole.

Learning Focusing

If the idea of Focusing appeals to you, you may want to try it for yourself. Anyone who is interested in learning Focusing can find a practitioner or teacher through the British Focusing Teachers' Association (BFTA) website, www.focusing.org.uk. A practitioner offers one-to-one sessions and teaching while a teacher also runs courses and workshops. Other websites with a range of articles and

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information are the Focusing Institute, www.focusing.org, Focusing Resources, www.focusingresources.com, Inner Relationship Focusing, www.innerrelationship.com, and BioSpiritual Focusing, www.biospiritual.org

Further Reading

Books

- Campbell, Peter, and McMahon, Edwin. Bio-Spirituality – Focusing As A Way To Grow (Loyola Press, 1997)*
- Damasio, Antonio. The Feeling of What Happens (Heinemann, 1999)*
- Gendlin, Eugene. Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning (Northwestern University Press, 1997)*
- Gendlin, Eugene. Focusing – 2nd edition, (Rider, 2003)*
- Gendlin, Eugene. Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: a manual of the experiential method (Guilford Press, 1996)*
- Griffith J.L. and Griffith M.E. Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy (Guilford Press, 2002)*
- Levine, Peter. Waking the Tiger – healing trauma (North Atlantic Books, 1997)*
- McMahon, Edwin. Beyond the Myth of Dominance – an alternative for a violent society (Sheed & Ward, 1993)*
- Purton, Campbell. Person Centred Therapy, a Focusing-oriented Approach (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)*
- Weiser Cornell, Ann. The Power of Focusing (New Harbinger, 1996)*
- The Radical Acceptance of Everything (Calluna Press, 2005)*
- Weiser Cornell, Ann and McGavin, Barbara. The Focusing Student's and Companion's Manual Parts 1 and 2 (Calluna Press, 2002)*
- Welwood, John. Toward a Psychology of Awakening (Shambhala, 2000)*

Articles

- Gendlin, Eugene. Selection of articles www.focusing.org/fot/fot*
- Rogers, Carl. The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change in Kirschenbaum, H. & Henderson, V. L. (eds): The Carl Rogers Reader (Constable, 1990)*
- Weiser Cornell, Ann. Selection of articles www.focusingresources.com*

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