

Experiential focusing techniques in counselling



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- Katrina Quaye (kate)

What wants my attention now?

Focusing is a unique skill discovered by Gene Gendlin. Working with Carl Rogers back in the 1960's, research was done as to why some people have success in therapy and others do not. A very interesting result emerged; those who progressed and benefitted most from therapy were the ones who took some time to reflect, when asked a question they seemed to sense something within themselves and an answer would begin to emerge. Over time Gendlin discovered what became known as the 'felt sense'. This is a sense that we all have but often it is operating unbeknown to us. This sense, sometimes called a bodily sense, can teach us much about ourselves and also our relationship with others and the world around us. It is a way of listening to our bodies with compassion, without judgement, and something that moved me most of all "gentleness".

Enhancement of knowledge

There are six basic steps to learn in focusing. To begin with we are taught to go through the process, step by step, learning these steps well, by sitting down and quietly going 'inside' our body. Once these steps are learnt thoroughly the process can flow with greater ease, quickly accessing our felt sense and going with it. This can be done taking a walk, doing the dishes, driving to work, with continuous practice our body will always be there guiding us.

1. Clearing the space, if someone is not quite in the moment, different thoughts, things to do list going through their mind, it is best to take a

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moment to clear a space inside. This can be done quite well in a short amount of time by asking the client in their mind to wrap up each concern on the list and placing it in an imaginary basket, not forcing each concern but in a clear friendly manner. This can also be done with a background feeling of being tense, anxious, whatever the feeling maybe to set it aside for the time being. Not forcing, but inviting it to stand aside for some time.

Gendlin would often take half an hour for this process with clients. Although it may be done in a much shorter amount of time, five to ten minutes. This would allow for a longer session with the felt sense. One then checks back with the self, that you are feeling clearer to start.

2. So now we can choose something to work on. One may already have an issue they want to work on, in which case one can check with the body if this is okay to work with. Alternatively one may see if there is something that needs their attention now. Often the sense is felt in the throat, chest or abdomen area. One of the key words in focusing is gently, gently say hello to the sense, checking if it is okay to be with it. Gendlin said ' it is best to be next to the sense, like a friend sitting on a park bench wanting to have a conversation'. We don't need to become immersed in the sense, just to be next to it. Like a sensitive baby animal we need to be gentle with the sense. Cornell (A. W. Cornell. pg. 18) mentions, ' Focusing is like being a friend to your own inner experience'. You may bring such qualities of friendship as curiosity, respect, empathy, warmth, compassion, letting it know that you are there to listen and listening with these qualities.

3. Now we have said hello and acknowledged it is there, we can begin to describe the felt sense, it may start with a feeling of tightness in the chest, we acknowledge this, then we can ask 'how does this tightness feel' we are checking back with this word to see that it captures it well.
4. We are now resonating back and forth with the word or image, we don't need to rush this process. Like a friend who wants to share something that is important to them, they don't like to feel rushed. We are sitting next to this felt sense, as Genlin (Gendlin pg 57-58) explains, ' the felt sense is more than an emotion, with an emotion we know what it is, angry, sad, joyful, but with the felt sense we say I can feel it right there, but i don't know what it is'. A felt sense contains a maze of meanings, we need to allow the sense time to form. That tightness may develop as anger, but within that anger can come a sense of the whole situation, what led up to that anger, how one is involved, it may for example show you scenes from childhood where you felt angry towards your parent for not understanding or listening to you. The felt sense can give a very complete form of understanding that will be more than just the anger.
5. We now have words and or images we can work with that through checking would fit with the sense. We now come to sense from " its" view, what it wants us to know.
6. I am letting ' it' know, I hear it, or sense it, welcoming it, it knows where it wants to or needs to go, we are listening not forcing or trying to work out whats happening, but allowing the process to unfold.

Ending. It is important to ask if there is more that needs to come or shall we end here. It is important to thank the felt sense, to re-assure it that if need be I will be back. If we can develop a trusting relationship that when we say we will return, that we do so, the felt sense will be re-assured. The more we do this the more it will work with us.

I will write a brief summary of my own personal experience using Focusing over a number of weeks. Having a quiet place I went inside of myself and sensed a feeling around my heart area. Gradually words like unappreciated, unloved emerged, I was listening to these words seeing if they were the ones. Yes they were. An image of a heart with a wooden dagger stabbed through it emerged, thick deep red blood was slowly oozing out. I was able to sit with this image for sometime, it was very strong, after sometime I needed to finish. Afterward I felt extremely heavy, it was hard to even continue with my daily tasks. The next day I came back to Focusing, realizing that I hadn't finished off the process properly, mainly because after some time it seemed too much for me. I went back inside and the image was still there, I sat with it and came to understand the experiences I had been through that brought about this image. I needed to be more caring of myself. I asked it the question of how would it feel like if the difficulty wasn't there. This brought forth an abundant response of joy and happiness, something like fire works were going off in celebration. I felt very light as if a big shift had taken place.

Over the next two weeks I went back in to see what was there. I had an image of myself as a young four year old, the feelings of being unheard came up, need to do things perfectly, as mentioned above it takes in a blend of the situation not just an emotional feeling, but a deeper sense of what it

was like to be that young child. I was being shown what it was like and by my acknowledging this allowing the whole of it to come out. There was a shift where those strong feelings seemed to melt away.

Enhancement of Understanding

Greater understanding of myself has come about through Focusing. Other peers and companions have said the same of their experiences when focusing; if one is to gain continuing benefits it is important to keep with the practice. There are certain attitudes that can help the process.

Focusing is a very gentle process, approaching it with the wisdom of not knowing is very beneficial, as Cornell (pg21) says, ' Why would you listen to someone if you think you already know what they have to say.' The feeling of respect and wanting to know what the sense has to say is of the utmost importance. We need to ' let go of what we know, to bring an attitude of open, friendly, interested, non judgmental curiosity to our experience". (Silverston, pg. 2). We need to come to trust the felt sense that it will led us where we need to go. Sometimes along the way it may seem to be taking many detours. Sometimes it is trying to give us a broader understanding, showing various images or certain words. In some ways it is like being an investigator being excited or curious to find out what lies within. We are not taking sides, leaving one part shut out, not wanting something to be heard or acknowledged, we are not excluding any part of ourselves. We are listening to each part and gradually integrating each part of the self. " When we listen to a place inside that hurts, for instance, the quality of our presence is not the usual one of fixing or trying to make it feel better. Rather, we are willing

to let it be exactly as it is". (Wilson & Van der Kooy, pg 1.) This attitude can be a huge relief for many, its okay to be as you are, allowing whatever is there to come up, to recognize and acknowledge it. As Gendlin (year?) said, "Every ' bad' feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being, if you give it the space to move toward its rightness."

Enhancement of Self Awareness

All of the above leads to greater self awareness. Coming to know what is going on inside of oneself. As many decisions need to be made in ones life, the building up of this awareness which can bring about greater confidence, is of huge benefit. I find in my own life if there is a lot happening around me I connect to that inner part which seems stable and able to help me keep centered. For those I have worked with there has been similar feed back, they are connecting to that inner part and making clearer judgements. This is an invaluable skill that can be used for myself in every day life, a skill that can be passed onto my clients, something that the therapist doesn't control, people can learn this and then use it for the rest of their lives without having to go to the therapist all the time.

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