

What Is Focusing?

Kye Nelson

Focusing is a way of accessing a bodily knowing called the felt sense.

The felt sense is the body's wisdom. It occurs at the interface of body and mind. It's your deep intuitive knowledge.

The felt sense is always of something: 'all that' which you can sense, without actually having any words for it yet, about something you're experiencing (or have experienced in the past).

The felt sense starts out unclear, but as you focus your attention on it, it can "open" into a whole field of intricate detail. Learning to Focus, is learning the moves that make this opening happen.

Often what comes in Focusing is surprising, but surprising in a special way; as you sit with a felt sense and the intricacy of it opens up, there is a sudden moment of insight which comes with an 'of course!' There is a sense of having 'always' known this, and also a sense of having just learned something new.

Not only insight about the past comes in Focusing. New steps you can take in your life right now, come as well. Steps like this come from your own body's knowing about your situation, and have a characteristically 'organic' quality to them. They fit you, by definition.

Focusing is supported by many research studies. Eugene Gendlin was the first person to name and point to the felt sense. His research at the University of Chicago, and a long series of studies since, have established that therapy is more effective when clients know how to access a felt sense.

Clients who know how to Focus don't get caught going around and around in thoughts and feelings about the situation. As they attend to the felt sense, new aspects of their experience emerge.

If you would like to begin to learn to Focus, you can access steps for the process at this link:
<http://www.focusing.org/sixsteps.html>

Though the steps above will help you begin to get to know the process, if you want to become proficient in the process it's recommended that you find a Focusing teacher or Focusing oriented therapist who can guide you. You can probably find a teacher near you by consulting the database of teachers on the Focusing Institute website, at www.focusing.org

INTRODUCING FOCUSING

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Brief Introduction to Focusing

Focusing is a powerful experiential practice that has its roots in clinical research going back 40 years when Carl Rogers and Eugene T. Gendlin at the University of Chicago, and some of their colleagues in coordinated research at other universities in the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, and Japan asked why some clients significantly improve in psychotherapy, and why others don't. The reasons they found are surprising and have nothing to do with the therapeutic orientation of the psychologist [e.g. psychoanalytic, humanistic,] nor have anything to do with the kind of problem or content discussed in a session. It has to do with the internal process of these clients, with what they were/are doing inside themselves.

What it is that successful therapy clients do, and that other's are not doing is so obvious that it can be recognized in just the first few minutes of a tape recorded therapy session by independent researchers, psychologists and psychology students alike. When these successful clients speak, their speech is frequently more hesitant, their pace often slower in forming words... they feel free to change their wording any number of times, even in mid sentence, and to correct previous statements. It turns out that these clients check their words against their a dimension of preverbal experiencing, and then further precision them, making them fit more exactly what they are feeling at the non verbal level of experiencing. As they do so new insight and new steps of forward movement emerge along the lines of whatever issue or problem they focus their inward attention on.

Subsequent research also reveals that most people do not know how to process like this. Hence Gendlin set out to develop a method of teaching this kind of inward processing to anyone. Additional research has confirmed that virtually anyone can learn these steps, in the practice now called “Focusing on a felt-sense”, or just “Focusing” for short.

On the Psychology of Focusing Attention:

Since personal and therapeutic change are so dependent upon our ability to focus inwardly, and since extensive research also suggests that the ability to focus attention is not highly developed in most people, but can become so with a little instruction and some practice, it will pay for us to understand what focusing and the related capacity of attention are.

Dictionary definitions of the word ‘focus’ tell us it means a central point of attention or attraction. It is also an activity of consciousness in which all elements or aspects converge in a focal point, a center of attention. Psychologically speaking, focusing is related to the processes of attention.

Attention is the directing by the mind onto an object of concentration. It is a capacity of the mind (or consciousness) which can direct its focus on a single object in the world, or within our own inward experiencing. In this sense, it is like a flashlight and we can freely choose to shine its light on whatever content we wish, inwardly or outwardly.

There is another aspect of attention: that it can be “captured” by some inward or outward stimulus. If this were not so, we wouldn’t be so distractible. The outer world can be highly stimulating. Imagine taking a walk in the woods while thinking about something you have to do later in the day. Suddenly you hear the sound of leaves and branches creaking, and you look around to see what has captured your attention. “Ahhh! It’s a little squirrel.” Then you start thinking about foraging for nuts, how soon autumn is coming, and off you go...having lost hold of your previous train of thought. It can be a good thing, ...or not! Both characteristics of attention are used in the process of Focusing on a felt sense, which we will be describing.

On the one hand focusing teaches you how to keep a hold of something you feel inwardly and not get distracted, yet at other places it will invite you to gently notice what is capturing your attention just now [what you are drawn to, or which issue most wants your attention. Human attentional process can be fragile, but its fragility can be used creatively, and it can become less fragile when you know how to keep a hold of a felt-sense of... (whatever you are focusing on).

Since most of us are good at visual perception and focusing our attention on things that are before the eyes- out there in the world, I am going to describe such an experience, and use it as a kind of template to explain the basics of the inward focusing process. The principle steps in the visual focusing process will be encountered again in the inward focusing process.

Example of Outward Focusing

I am gazing out on the horizon of Lake Michigan. A vast expanse of blue water and ever-shifting waves....gradually something begins emerging into the field of my awareness there in that mass of undulating blue, but I can't yet say what it is. I don't know. It is still unclear. But something is there, I am sure of it. For some time I still don't know what it is,... it is getting closer and clearer...but I still can't make it out. I notice that my body seems a little tense as I watch. But I keep watching and attending to it visually, It looks like a speck...no more like a ball. No sooner did I say "ball" than this mysterious object shifts and shows another side of itself. I Ask myself: Ok. How does it look now? It looks....it looks kind of... long.... "A ship?"no, too small for that.. I can see." [Long pause] Ahh!!! ...ah...yes, it is a large piece of drift wood!" It comes closer, and I check again, Yep, "I can see a root area and a branch, it's driftwood alright!"

This is an example of focusing visually on some emerging object outside of me, out there in the world. It offers us an example of many of the same kinds of steps or moves used when turning our attention inward and focusing on some as yet unclear feeling of...(whatever we are focusing on). In the example just given, I am just sitting and watching the wide blue expanse of the lake, and for a little bit of time, before something begins to show itself a tiny little bit on the water's surface.

I try to get a hold of what it is it with some concept...that is, I try to figure out what it is, but I can't; no concept will fit it yet. But I trust that it will eventually come more clearly into view and show me what it really is. So I just keep observing, just keeping a hold of that tiny little spec, watching it gradually get larger and clear. I try again to say what it is...it looks like a speck....no maybe a ball....but then it shifts a little and it now looks distinctly different from a ball.

Most people check their outward perceptions like I did often enough. But extensive psychological research shows that most people do not check their own thoughts or words against their inward experiencing. This is the crucial process which makes therapy work, and which can help us change, grow, come more into our own, and become more creative.

Look at the steps, attitudes, and questions underlined in my example above. Pay special attention to the underlined words, because those kinds of steps go on in inward focusing as well.

- 1.) A space has been cleared for focusing, opening up, and taking in the Blue expanse, the reason for this was to get a sense of the drift, of the direction my life is moving, but in the example I give, I am just sitting comfortably there attending to the vast expanse when something begins to emerge into my awareness. I begin to notice a little speck on the horizon.
- 2.) At first this little speck is unclear, I can't yet say what it is.
- 3.) But I keep attending to it, so I am sure something not water is there.
- 4.) It moves closer and I slowly and progressively get more a sense of what it is, but still it isn't clear. I try out different words for it.
- 5.) I notice that my body feels a little tension as I keep my attention on it.
- 6.) I try out more different words on it ("It's a speck, a ball, no...") and keep waiting for the right word that fits.
- 7.) I ask: "What does it mostly seem like now?")...and I wait some more...
- 8.) It comes closer and shifts, showing a different side or aspect of it (it is "long")
- 9.) I notice a little easing of the tension in my body with this shift I grasp more of what it is. I try another word (it's a ship, maybe?).
- 10.) Finally, "Ahhh!..It's a large piece of driftwood. [I notice the tension is released, a shift of energy felt very subtly but definitely in my body.
- 11.) I check again as it comes closer. [Yup, it's driftwood alright].

Take note of these little movements, for they are repeated in various ways in the discussions of Focusing Steps.

What is Focusing on a felt sense anyway?

Focusing on a felt sense uses essentially the same steps I used in the example above, only it is turned inward to some vague unclear sense detectable sometimes more strongly, but more often only just a tiny little bit, usually in the middle area of your body. It can be some tiny little feeling or sense of something that seems out of phase. Focusing places attention on that, as if to listen to its 'still small voice' with some care and consideration.

Another way to say it is that in the inward act of focusing, you turn the attention inward to a spot, a place that feels as yet unclear, some stirring of energy, some disagreeable feel of ..., that you can't yet name; some odd sense of discomfort. There is a bodily felt quality to it, however subtle. This unclear kind of body sense is termed a 'felt sense' in the practice of Focusing.

A felt sense is not new. Research shows that successful clients check their words and phrases against it and modify them to communicate it more precisely. The felt sense is used in the creative activities of artists, philosophers, scientists, therapists and so on. We all tap it unbeknownst to ourselves, at times. Let me give some examples.

The Tip of the Tongue Phenomenon

When you are trying to say something but the right word won't come. You hem and haw, and grunt, but it just won't come yet. The body feels tense because it can't yet say it—but wants to, yet it feels the meaning, and awaits the right words. This is a felt-sense. It is a felt-meaning more exactly, without the word. When the right word comes, it is satisfying, and the body shifts and relaxes, or feels a release of energy.

The Forgetting her Name Phenomenon

Another closely related example is seeing someone at a party you know, but can't recall their name. Yet you know them, you feel who they are, the word, or rather, the exact name has not yet come, there is only the felt-sense of that person. When the name comes, again there is a pleasant if subtle bodily felt shift.

The Forgotten Dream

You wake in the morning from a dream, but you can't remember it at all. There is only a murky residue of the dream, a kind of felt-mood, and it can tell you if the dream was a horrible thing, or very pleasant, or what have you. If you stay with this murky residue left by the dream, keeping a hold of it a while, yes, focus on it, sometimes you can't get the dream back, and feel the body sense of relief when you do.

The Poem Place

When a poet feels the urge to write, and before the words have come, he or she feels some urge to poetize, to let words form about something. They sit down with that feeling, keep a hold

of it, and wait for the words to come, for the pen to start moving. Often they will cross words out as they check them against something felt very exactly—and yet is still awaiting the words that fit or match it exactly.

Artists in search of the right color, musicians in search of the right tonality or chord, intuitive scientists in search of the right kind of concept also frequently visit this zone, although it can often happen haphazardly for them because they don't know the focusing steps that can help them go there anytime they choose and get a hunch, an intuition, or inspiration for...

In all these fairly common examples of having a felt sense, it is to be found at a level before words and other kinds of expressions form, and is a felt touchstone against words and other kinds of expressions are checked.

Carrying Forward and the Implied Next Steps

A felt sense of something occurs at the mind-body interface, inside you. It is neither clear like an emotion nor a thought, but has an unclear felt quality at first, and when it shifts and opens, its detail can be seen with clarity. Words or other expressions that fit it exactly help carry it forward into little next steps.

This isn't just positive thinking. There is an implicit forward moving direction in anything natural and living. The body just like anything in the natural world is an intricate mesh with the world, with the earth and myriad other living beings. You can't really separate lungs and air and tree, they all imply each other. Take away the trees and there wouldn't be much air around. Take away air from the world and there would be no lungs. Similarly eating implies digestion which implies digestive juices, which implies hunger pains in stomach, which implies food, which implies digestion, nutrients in blood stream, which implies excretion, which implies earth, which implies water, sunshine and air, and...so on. Our felt-sensing naturally has the same implying of next steps. Because of this something deep within our experiencing is always wanting us to grow more, come on line more, change, develop. C.G Jung called this the "principle of individuation and he said "...everything living dreams of Individuation." Carl Rogers said that the directional tendency of human beings is an instance of what nature does, he called it 'self-actualizing tendency.' Hence focusing on a felt-sense is a way of tapping this natural forward moving tendency for personal and relationship growth, for creative problem resolution, for gaining insight and better understanding of ourselves and others.

Some Facts

Focusing occurs exactly at the interior interface of body-mind.

Focusing as an inward act occurs when we turn attention to the border zone between the conscious and unconscious, to use the vocabulary of depth psychology, or it occurs at the unclear edge or horizon of what we know and don't know, to use a phenomenological vocabulary.

A felt sense is a holistic bodily feel of all about ...(whatever it is we focus on). It is at first unclear, but can open and reveal its intricacy, and forward moving steps can come from it if we know how to engage it through the steps of the focusing process.

When learning to focus on a felt sense, it can seem odd or uncomfortable at first, for the mind is used to focusing attention on what is clear and familiar. A felt sense brings what is unclear and often new or surprising. There may be a tendency to impose clear and familiar meanings from the mind... but it is best to set those aside and keep a hold on the felt sense, and let the words or expressions come from it freshly, and be confirmed by it when they do come.

Focusing can greatly enhance and stabilize the creative and problem solving process, and bring steps of change where our lives are stuck or constricted. Focusing has been successfully used in psychology, education, the arts and writing process, in business and theory building, and in many other fields.

Research shows that focusing has beneficial effects on health, can improve immune function, decrease depression and anxiety, and improve the relation to the body. Research also shows that focusing can be taught to virtually anyone when it is broken down into several little steps. [For my version of Focusing Steps, click on that link on this website.]

You can learn much more about focusing, the research, the applications, and find a focusing partner or focusing oriented psychotherapist through the Focusing Institute of New York webpage: www.focusing.org See also the research link at the bottom of this article.

Note on Focusing as a Heart-centered Practice

Focusing is a potent practice that can produce creative change in many arenas of life. Like introspection and empathy, it is a value neutral tool and could potentially be used to violate your core values and essential nature, or those of others. We've all had the experience of people who use psychology out of a motivation to manipulate us. BUT, when Focusing is used to find and live from your core of aliveness, and helps you identify core life issues, and helps you find and remove what is in the way of living from your core, it becomes a solid heart practice. Focusing is in fact the experiential root of the development of the concepts in heart theory, and is also a vital element of most of the heart psychology practices. Heart-based Focusing inquires into who you are in your most natural and authentic sense, and into what it is you most deeply want in life, into what is your ultimate Vision or Purpose in Life, into what brings you alive, and so on. Heart psychology uses Focusing in a solid way to help you check your impulses and actions against your core of aliveness, and your core life issues and purposes. It has developed a number of experiential steps and questions that help you find your own core of aliveness, and live, think, plan, and act from it. [See fyp, oyh, and JFH/GZ on this website for more information.]

More on Research Studies of Focusing

Marion N Hendricks. Focusing-Oriented/Experiential Psychotherapy. [A Review of more than 80 studies on Focusing and Experiencing Level.] In Cain, David and Seeman, Jules (eds) Humanistic Psychotherapy: Handbook of Research and Practice, American Psychological Association, 2001. Also: http://www.focusing.org/research_basis.html