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# A Focusing-Oriented Approach to Couples Therapy

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**Abstract.** The use of focusing in couples therapy can help a couple remove blocks to intimacy, understand themselves and each other more deeply, shift stuck dynamics, and nurture connection and intimacy. Focusing-Oriented couples work helps interrupt the cycle of blame, defensiveness, and attack. This is replaced with an attitude of respect, gentleness, and kindness toward themselves and the full range of their experience. This approach to couples therapy is based on the premise that what is happening *between* the members of the couple is a reflection of what is happening *within* the two individuals. In this somatic approach, focusing helps each partner stay connected to their own bodily felt sense of relevant issues and concerns. This allows a safer way to uncover underlying feelings, needs, and concerns. Learning to express these in a gentle, nondefensive, tender way creates a climate that invites and nurtures intimacy, love, and connection.

**Key words:** focusing, intimacy, felt sense, connecting, tenderness, defensiveness

## Focusing in der Paartherapie

Die Verwendung von Focusing in der Paartherapie kann einem Paar helfen, Blockaden der Intimität zu beseitigen, sich selbst und einander besser zu verstehen, festgefahrene Dynamiken wieder in Gang zu setzen sowie Verbindung und Intimität auszubilden. Focusing-orientierte Paararbeit hilft, den Teufelskreis von Schuld, Verteidigung und Angriff zu unterbrechen. Dieser wird ersetzt durch eine Haltung des Respekts, der Sanftheit und Freundlichkeit gegenüber sich selbst, dem andern und dem ganzen Spektrum der Erfahrungen beider. Dieser Ansatz für Paartherapie basiert auf der Annahme, dass, was sich zwischen den beiden ereignet, ein Abbild dessen ist, was sich innerhalb der beiden Individuen abspielt. In diesem somatischen Ansatz hilft Focusing jedem der Partner mit dem eigenen Felt Sense des Körpers zu relevanten Themen und Sorgen in Verbindung zu bleiben. Das ermöglicht einen sichereren Zugang, um zugrunde liegende Gefühle, Bedürfnisse und Sorgen aufzudecken. Zu lernen, dies auf eine sanfte, nicht-defensive, zärtliche Art auszudrücken schafft ein Klima, das Intimität, Liebe und Verbindung weckt und fördert.

## El uso del *focusing* en la terapia de parejas

El uso del *focusing* en la terapia de parejas puede ayudar a una pareja a quitar obstáculos para la intimidad,

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comprenderse mutuamente en mayor profundidad, cambiar dinámicas trabadas, y nutrir la conexión y la intimidad. El trabajo con parejas orientado al *focusing* ayuda a interrumpir el ciclo de culpa, defensividad y ataque. Este es reemplazado con una actitud de respeto, gentileza, y amabilidad hacia ellos mismos y hacia el rango total de la experiencia de ellos. Este enfoque a la terapia de parejas se basa en la premisa de que lo que ocurre entre los miembros de la pareja es un reflejo de lo que está ocurriendo dentro de los dos individuos. En este enfoque somático, el *focusing* ayuda a cada una de las partes de la pareja a mantenerse conectada con su propia sensación corporal sentida de los asuntos e inquietudes relevantes. Esto permite una manera más segura para develar sentimientos, necesidades e inquietudes subyacentes. Aprender a expresarlos en una manera gentil, no defensiva y tierna genera un clima que invita y nutre la intimidad, el amor y la conexión.

### L'utilisation du Focusing dans la thérapie de couples

L'utilisation du Focusing dans la thérapie de couples peut aider un couple à lever les obstacles à l'expérience partagée de l'intimité, à mieux se comprendre soi-même et à mieux se comprendre mutuellement, à mettre en mouvement une dynamique relationnelle bloquée, et à favoriser le lien et une relation d'intimité. Le travail dans l'approche du Focusing aide à couper le cycle de blâme, de défensivité et d'attaque, qui est alors remplacé par une attitude de respect, de douceur et d'attention envers eux-mêmes et la profondeur de leur expérience. Cette approche de la thérapie du couple est fondée sur la notion suivante : ce qui se passe entre les personnes du couple est le reflet de ce qui se passe à l'intérieur des deux personnes. Dans cette approche somatique, le Focusing aide chaque membre du couple à rester connecté à son propre "sens corporel" par rapport aux questions et soucis qui s'y relèvent. Ceci permet une manière plus sécurisante de découvrir les sentiments, les questions et les besoins sous-jacents. Apprendre à les exprimer avec douceur, non-défensivité et tendresse crée un climat qui invite et favorise une relation d'intimité, d'amour et de connexion.

### O recurso ao *focusing* na terapia de casal

O recurso ao *focusing* na terapia de casal pode ajudar os elementos do casal a remover bloqueios à intimidade, compreenderem-se mutuamente e a si mesmos mais profundamente, a mudar uma dinâmica bloqueada e a alimentar a ligação e a intimidade. A intervenção pelo *focusing* no trabalho com casais ajuda a interromper o ciclo de culpa, defensividade e ataque. Este ciclo é substituído por atitudes de respeito, consideração e bondade na relação e na plenitude das suas experiências. Esta abordagem à terapia de casal baseia-se na premissa de que aquilo que se passa entre os elementos do casal reflecte o que se passa no interior de cada um deles. Nesta perspectiva somática, o *focusing* ajuda cada parceiro a manter-se em contacto com o seu próprio sentir corporal face a assuntos relevantes e a preocupações. Assim estabelece-se um caminho mais seguro para revelar sentimentos subjacentes, necessidades e preocupações. Aprender a expressá-los de forma gentil, não defensiva e terna cria um clima que convida e promove a intimidade, o amor e a ligação.

### カップルセラピーにおけるフォーカシングの活用

カップルセラピーにフォーカシングを適用する事で、カップル同士の親密化への障害を取り除き、自己理解および他者理解を深め、行き詰まった関係性に变化をもたらし、二者間につながりと親しみが育つ事を可能にする。さらに、フォーカシング志向カップルセラピーは、非難/防衛/攻撃の悪循環を断ち切り、お互いへの尊重/やさしさ/親切さを促進し、関係性をより豊かに生きる事が可能になる。このアプローチでは、カップル間に起こっている事は、それぞれの個人の内面において起こっている事の反映であると考えられる。従って、フォーカシングを適用することで、各パートナーの課題や問題に関する身体のフェルトセンスに注意を向け、そのフェルトセンスに含まれる気持ちやニーズ、心配事などを安全な形で明らかにして行く。このように内面をやさしく、非防衛的で、穏やかな形で表現して行く事を学ぶ事によって、親密さ、愛、そしてつながりを促進する雰囲気カップルの間に醸成されてくるのである。

Eugene Gendlin's extensive research during the 1960s suggested that what made the crucial difference between success and failure in psychotherapy was not the therapist's model or theoretical orientation. Instead, it was something that clients were doing quite naturally within themselves. Successful clients were not simply reporting events or their interpretations of events. They were freshly exploring and expressing, in the moment, their various felt senses regarding life issues and concerns. They were groping for words that conveyed the subtleties of their felt experience.

Buoyed by the research results, Gendlin developed specific steps so that others could learn what these gifted clients were doing quite naturally. He helped them slow down and attend to the more subtle aspects of their felt experience: "By focusing we mean spending time with something bodily sensed, but unclear (until it comes 'into focus')" (Gendlin, 1996, p. 34). Gendlin began to teach focusing to individuals, both inside and outside of the traditional therapy setting. But little, if anything, has been written about how to adapt focusing to the challenging work of couples therapy. If focusing can lead to a shift in experience and perspective, how might couples use the process to remove blocks to intimacy and understand themselves more deeply through exploring what their relationship is touching in them? How can focusing be used to shift the stuck dynamics between them, nurture their connection, and see each other with fresher eyes?

Individuals seek partnerships to feel cared about, connected, and loved. Intimacy and closeness is sought, though without losing themselves in a sloppy enmeshment. The deeper work of couples therapy, and my own style of working, is not short-term conflict resolution (although focusing can help here too), but rather in helping a couple find a way to converse about vital issues in ways that allow trust and intimacy to deepen and flourish. My own attempts to use focusing with couples have evolved gradually over the past twenty-five years as a marriage and family therapist. Although I had been using focusing with individuals since 1980, it was unclear to me whether focusing would be helpful for couples. But as the following principles became clearer to me, I discovered that focusing is a compelling way to help couples resolve conflicts and create deeper trust and intimacy.

## PRINCIPLES FOR FOCUSING WITH COUPLES

### Connecting with each person

As a Focusing-Oriented couples therapist, I do my best to make a connection with each of the partners by conveying that I hear their feelings, concerns, and perspectives, their fears, their hurts, and their hopes for a more meaningful and fulfilling life. Similar to many therapists, I may make reflections such as, "So what I'm hearing you say is ..." or, "you're really feeling angry (or hurt or sad) around not feeling heard, and you've been feeling this way for a long time." Connecting with my clients in this way is consistent with findings from neuroscience. As Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000, p. 170) explain, "The first part of limbic healing is being emotionally known — having someone with a keen ear catch your melodic essence."

One complexity of couples therapy is in equalizing the expression of empathy in order to avoid the appearance of taking sides. Empathic listening by the therapist creates a climate where clients can begin to listen to themselves and each other more closely. This respectful attitude creates a safe and supportive environment in which issues can be openly explored. This person-centered, reflective listening is not limited to focusing, but forms an essential foundation for more specific focusing interventions to follow.

### **Interrupting the cycle of blame and attack**

The cycle of blame and defensiveness that typically leads to an escalation of hostility can be painful to watch in the couples we come to care about. But rather than throw up our arms in frustration, how can we as couples therapists intervene in ways that might help the couple become more relational rather than reactive so that productive work can happen? To be sure, there are times when it is nigh impossible to stop high-conflict couples who cannot seem to help themselves from employing their most finely honed instruments of destruction: poison-tipped darts of blame and criticism, bloodcurdling contempt and sarcasm, and heart-piercing attacks upon each other's character. These behaviors often continue despite cognitive awareness that they ravage the intimacy that is desired. John Gottman's (1999) extensive research suggests that couples who regularly have destructive interactions are unlikely to survive as a couple. When interpersonal relating is frequently infused with criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness — what Gottman calls the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse — a couple is predictably headed for divorce.

Before productive therapy can occur, the cycle of mutual attacks and shaming that lead to escalation or shut down must be addressed in a nonthreatening way so that their intensity and frequency subside and are gradually replaced with more self-revealing, relational communication (Amodeo, 2001). The bleeding must stop before healing can begin. Similar to other approaches to couples therapy, a Focusing-Oriented therapist coaxes the couple to try a different tack.

One part of building trust with a couple is by uncovering core dynamics, conflicts, and differences, and offering a fresh approach to working with them and talking about them. Being gently direct, respectful, and clear in offering a different way of relating to themselves and each other creates a climate where each of them can begin to hear and understand each other, rather than repeatedly attack, stonewall, or get defensive. Couples are often open to a new way of being and relating. Although defenses are often robust, a strong part of them is seeking help because they want to try something different and are willing to accept guidance. However, resistance may remain fierce until they have the repeated experience of feeling closer as a result of practicing an approach that may seem odd or difficult at first. One way I try to build trust is by encouraging a couple to pause when I sense that a hurtful comment was just made. Rather than allow the pattern of attack and defensive counterpunch to continue, I will ask them to take a moment to notice what they are experiencing inside themselves right now, oftentimes directing their attention to their bodies. If they can begin to contact the deeper feelings beneath their surface emotions and decipher the meanings inherent in them, something new may happen between them.

Gendlin suggests that “people in therapy often have strong emotions and ‘gut feelings’ that are quite concrete and experiential. They are not just talking or intellectualizing. Yet despite the fullness of the emotional content, it does not change; they feel the same feelings over and over again” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 12). The same principle extends to couples. The expression of the same feelings and accusations is painfully common. Yet little will change between the partners until they learn to replace familiar criticisms with a deeper expression of their felt experience.

### **Allowing the nervous system to settle**

A principle of focusing is that forward movement in our lives is wanting to happen. Our well-being suffers when our process gets stuck. Focusing leads awareness to a place within ourselves that allows our next step forward to naturally unfold. Applying this principle to couples, we might recognize that interpersonal stuckness and pain are the results of something that wants to happen for an individual within a partnership that is not happening. Focusing facilitates the sense of “what wants to happen.”

We move toward partnership in order to experience something more than what our individual existence can provide (secure bonding, love, connection, and even ecstasy). When this longing is frustrated or disrupted, we may experience it as a threat to our safety and well-being. Such a threat may trigger the lower structures of our brain (the reptilian brain), which are associated with fear and anxiety. Such fears are often acted out in destructive ways. Discord between partners reflects a bodily event that may involve activation of the nervous system, especially if there has been early trauma. Certain inflexible patterns of fight, flight, or freeze operate as defenses in couples. Such reactions are often amplified when nervous system pathways were laid down earlier in life from shock, especially during the first three years. These particular developmental imprints, resulting from family dynamics or other traumas, become re-enacted when one partner perceives the other as threatening their bond and security, if not their very existence. Couples therapy can become more meaningful and productive as the nervous system settles. When one’s heart is racing, blood pressure rises, and the mind is working hard, the part of the brain that can relate to another’s feelings and needs shuts down. As Gottman’s research discovered, “If your heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute you won’t be able to hear what your partner is trying to tell you no matter how hard you try” (Gottman, 1999, p. 180). The sense of being emotionally flooded must somehow be addressed before nondefensive listening and fruitful interaction can occur.

This view is consistent with Peter Levine’s (1997) and Levine and Kline’s (2007) work with trauma. The reptilian part of our brain gets activated when our organism experiences a threat to its survival or integrity. We are programmed to the fight, flight, or freeze responses as instinctual ways to survive such threats. This may explain why couples are so quick to blame and attack each other (fight), walk away (flight), or stonewall (freeze) when they experience words or behaviors that threaten their sense of safety in the relationship. Reactivity is especially strong when a history of trauma or betrayal has generated some degree of dissociation from the body. Since focusing gently leads attention inside the body, it addresses

neurological patterns that can be problematic between partners. Future research on this would be helpful.

The varieties of betrayal that we experience, as explained in *Love & Betrayal* (Amodeo, 1994), can prompt a cutting off from uncomfortable experiences and parts of ourselves. This distancing from ourselves provided needed protection during a time when we lacked the resources, skills, or power to take care of ourselves in painful situations. Yet, allowing a continuation of this dissociation constitutes a kind of self-abandonment or self-betrayal that keeps us distant from the intimacy for which we long. Focusing helps us gently welcome these cut-off feelings and parts of ourselves, which enables our pain to heal and fosters the self-integration and wholeness that provides the foundation for a vibrant intimacy. As we become stronger in our capacity to face unpleasant feelings, we become more willing to accept the risks associated with being vulnerable and opening our heart to others.

### Cultivating the focusing attitude

Focusing rests on what Gendlin calls, “a friendly inner attitude” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 56). This is a way of being respectful, gentle, and kind toward ourselves and the full range of our experience. As life issues and feelings emerge, we are asked to meet them with a spirit of nonjudgment, acceptance, and empathy. Rather than struggle to fix and change ourselves, we are invited to accept ourselves as we are as the starting point for positive change.

Focusing teacher and psychologist Joan Klagsbrun suggests that when we treat our “inside places” with

receptivity, gentleness, kindness, friendliness, and a sense of acceptance, they respond favorably. Even when we don't like what we find, we take the attitude that since it's there anyway, we might as well be friendly towards it, acknowledge it, and accept it. When that happens, these ‘inside’ places begin to speak to us, to open up, and then they will change. (Klagsbrun, 1999, pp. 14–15)

Members of a couple typically develop fixed views of each other. The focusing attitude involves looking at things freshly. Couples are repeatedly invited to set aside pre-existing assumptions, opinions, and beliefs. This allows an open, unobstructed space for new richness, nuance, and complexity of feelings and experience to emerge. By helping the couple spend time with this unclear “growing edge” or “felt sense,” unexpected and creative possibilities for change begin to unfold.

### Connecting with the felt sense

The core of focusing involves contacting a *felt sense* of personal concerns. The felt sense is a body sensation that is at first unclear, but definitely registers as a feeling of something that is going on, though this something is often vague. For example, we might feel uncomfortable with a person we meet, but not know what that is about. Our mind may come up with explanations, but until we take time to go inside and “feel into” the issue, we will only skim

the surface. Perhaps we gradually realize that this person reminds us of someone we dislike, or we may feel hurt or shamed by a subtle criticism expressed indirectly.

As a Focusing-Oriented therapist, I ask open-ended questions designed to encourage the client to pause, listen, and allow the subtle *bodily feel* of a concern or situation to emerge. I might ask, “What is the feeling of this whole thing, e.g., the issue, situation, problem?” Or, “Would it feel okay to take some time to just sense into that anger?” Or, “Take a moment to feel that heaviness and see if anything more wants to come.” Words, images, and meanings gradually emerge that capture the *feel* of the whole issue. For example, “It feels like a heaviness in my chest,” or “There’s a hollowness in my stomach — it feels connected to a fear of being left.”

Partners often cling tenaciously to their viewpoint that the source of their impasse is their obstinate partner. If partners can suspend their beliefs and perspectives for a moment and attend to their bodily felt sense of what bothers them, then something new might arise from within them — and then gradually between them.

Focusing rests on the premise that there is always more going on than we intellectually know. As explained in *The Authentic Heart* (Amodeo, 2001), it is through an unlayering of felt experience that we come closer to what is really happening inside us. As we contact what is more deeply authentic within us we may notice that something inside us shifts: we discover more wholeness and more connection with ourselves. We feel better as we connect with what is real, even if it is something painful or difficult. This deeper connection with felt experience creates the ground for connecting with a partner in a more authentic, empathic, tender way. Partners often fail to realize that even if they have an accurate perception about each other’s limitations, this does not lead to a transformation of their interpersonal difficulties. The path toward healing and resolution lies not in trying to fix each other, but rather in bringing forward *the more* that implicitly exists in conflict situations, but is not yet known, embraced, and expressed in a *felt way*.

### **The movement between tracking one’s own felt sense and helping clients track theirs**

A vital skill needed by the therapist is creating a container in which connection and intimacy can thrive. This requires that the therapist be connected with his or her own bodily felt sense of what fosters safety, openness, and connection in a session, and be prepared to intervene or reframe an issue when a client’s words are likely to be provocative or inflammatory — or create defensiveness or shut-down in his or her partner. For example, when Doris stated in our third couples session, “Andy never listens to me,” I sensed that this would provoke hurt, shame, or defensiveness in him. I turned to him and asked, “How did you feel hearing that?” My goal here was to be clear with the couple that I will address the communication process, not just the content, especially when their way of communicating is likely to push the other away. My hope is also to build some trust with Andy by implicitly conveying that I understand how hearing this criticism might be painful. I try to craft my words in a way that does not alienate or shame Doris.

Responding to my question, Andy replied that it hurts to hear Doris say that he never listens. He protested (defensively) that he “can never do anything right!” I then sought clarification whether Doris really means that he *never* listens, or if what she really means is that she does not feel heard as much as she wants or in the way she wants. My reframing intervention (where helping Doris find words that reflect her actual experience rather than blame him) is likely to be appreciated by Andy. She agrees that that says it better. Part of my work is to catch my clients’ deeper feelings and felt meanings by listening to my own felt sense of what they are trying to convey, and help them express this in ways that invite contact rather than promote alienation. This is consistent with the approach of couples therapist Daniel Wile (1981), who helps clients find ways to express feelings and meanings that they cannot find the words for.

As Andy’s nervous system settled, I turned to Doris and said, “I’m curious about how it feels for you to not be heard . . . . Take your time . . . and see if you notice anything in your body around this.” After a few moments of quietly attending within, Doris softened. She uncovered hurt and sadness underlying her initial anger and irritation: “I feel lonely and sad to not be heard. I want to feel closer to Andy.” I conveyed empathy and invited her to express those feelings to Andy directly. As Doris did so, I asked Andy how it feels to hear her sadness. As he saw (with my help) that these feelings are about *her* rather than an attack on *him*, it became easier to hear her. His defensiveness began to melt and a sense of connection arose in that moment.

### Allowing a space for positive feelings

As couples begin to share more from their hearts rather than from mental judgments, tender feelings often arise, which lead to moments of empathy and closeness. As such moments occur more frequently, trust and safety slowly grow. It is vital to allow time to experience positive feelings rather than solely focus on problems. As I develop some trust with a couple, I sometimes invite them to pause during these moments and I may say something like: “Would it be okay to just notice how it feels being closer right now?” This helps them experience something more positive, which may become an increasingly rich resource in the relationship. It is often challenging for a couple to tolerate warm, pleasant feelings. Allowing such feelings posits the risk of experiencing a more painful loss if or when the relationship ends.

This mini experience of beginning with a conflict, allowing their underlying felt senses to emerge, leading to increased feelings of closeness, becomes a template for future possibilities. Their nervous systems have had a small taste of something positive resulting from processing a difficult issue. If we can work consistently enough so that they re-experience this shift and movement over and over again, real progress is gradually made. Slowly, a couple can begin practicing this new way of processing issues apart from our sessions. But trying this at home prematurely may lead to discouragement if partners revert to old patterns. Without my being there to point out unhelpful communications, hold the container for the relationship, remind them to pause and attend to their felt sense, and help them find words that convey the deeper nuances of their felt experience, they may enter the slippery slope to escalating

conflict. Couples need varying lengths of time to continue with training wheels before riding confidently on their own. Skillful, active interventions are necessary to educate couples, preserve safety, offer guidance, and nourish connection. Therapists must pick their battles wisely in order not to be overly directive or controlling, which can create mistrust of the therapist and a stifling atmosphere. This is not an easy balance to obtain.

### **What is happening between the partners is a reflection of what is happening within the two individuals**

Destructive criticism, blame and defensiveness are more likely to shift as the individuals contact the felt experience that drives them. The “Four Horsemen” that Gottman delineates are steered by something that is uncomfortable or difficult to face and feel. In my experience as a psychotherapist, this is usually some kind of fear, shame, hurt, pain and/or unmet longing. As these more tender experiences are contacted and explored, each person suddenly has something new to say to the other — something that may transform their usual way of relating.

As explained in *Being Intimate* (Amodeo & Wentworth, 1986), for a couple to become more relational with each other, they need to become more relational with themselves. Therefore, Focusing-Oriented couples work has both an intrapsychic and interpersonal aspect. Being more connected and intimate with oneself opens the door to intimacy with others. Conflicts between partners usually reflect some inner conflict, disconnection, or dissociation with some aspect of themselves. Most frequently there is something going on with both individuals that contributes to their trouble. Of course, this is not always true, such as in cases of domestic violence or unprompted verbal abuse (although the attribution “verbal abuse” may be misapplied by a person who has a sensitivity to any hint of criticism). As one person’s blind spots are gently addressed, there is often a welcome, surprising shift in the dynamic between the partners.

During a Focusing-Oriented couples session, I often find appropriate moments to work with each of the individuals. When one person gets activated by something their partner says, perhaps a critical word or a different take on what happened during an interaction at home, I slow the process down by inviting the activated person to notice what they are experiencing right now.

Attending to one person during a couples session is also common in the approach of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). As Sue Johnson describes it, “The therapeutic alliance is characterized by the therapist being able to be with each partner as that partner encounters his/her emotional responses and enacts his/her position in their relationship” (Johnson, 1996, p. 34).

#### *An example of working with one part of the couple*

Sue would frequently criticize her partner, Joe, for being too attached to his cat. Sue accused him of feeding Fido too often and insisted that there was something unhealthy about snuggling with this feline creature. She often drew upon her Buddhist belief that attachment leads to suffering. At first glance this appeared to be an obvious case of jealousy — he was paying more attention to his cat than to her!

Over many years, I have developed the humility to trust that something much more rich can emerge by letting awareness unfold from within the client, rather than trying to be clever (under the guise of being helpful) by interpreting what *I* think is going on. As Gendlin explains, “There are still therapists who are satisfied with a plausible interpretation if the client accepts it. They do not wonder, nor do they teach their clients to try to sense inwardly, whether an interpretation is a dead end or not” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 8).

During one session, Sue was criticizing Joe for buying a premium can of salmon cat food for his beloved cat. I asked if she would be willing to take a moment and notice how she was feeling in her body as she expressed this to him. She responded quickly and defensively that she was angry and had a right to be. I reassured her that she had a right to all of her feelings and wondered if she was willing to take some time to notice where in her body she felt angry and what it felt like. My approach here reflects Gendlin’s suggestion that things may shift as we connect with how we are experiencing them in our bodies. This way of working is also compatible with Levine’s Somatic Experiencing work with trauma. As he puts it, “The only way to consciously access our healing resources is through sensation and the felt sense. Sensation is the language of the reptilian brain” (Levine, 1997, p. 87). He goes on to suggest that the impact of trauma on our organism can only be resolved through accessing body sensations. Borrowing Gendlin’s term *felt sense* in his work with trauma, he asserts: “Resolution is accomplished through working with this unresolved impact through the felt sense” (Levine, 1997, p. 149).

As Sue slowed down and attended to her bodily sensations, she noticed a knot in her stomach that she identified as anger. I asked her to take time to just notice this knot along with her anger and see if anything more wanted to come. In effect, I invited her to be curious about her own experience. I prompted her to be with it in a gentle, caring way. This focusing attitude put her in a good place to notice if there is anything more that might want to emerge — without any pressure. If nothing comes, that is fine too. Gradually, she noticed a heavy feeling in her chest and a sense of sadness. At first she had no idea what this was about. I asked if it was okay to be with it. Asking whether it is okay builds safety into the focusing process. If it is too overwhelming, I want to know that. We can then back off. Focusing is very gentle and never crashes through people’s boundaries. They are always in control of whether or not to go further (as they check with their felt sense about this). If there is any sense of being overwhelmed I want to pause and try something else.

Staying with the sadness, something came that surprised all of us. Sue recognized that her sadness was related to the death of her own beloved cat many years ago. She had become very connected to her cat and vowed never to allow herself to get so attached to another pet. No longer would she be devastated by such a loss. As she discovered what was happening *within* herself, something shifted *between* them. Joe could now understand her concern about him, even though it was being expressed in a destructive way. Sue’s intention was to protect Joe from the painful loss associated with being attached. He could now see that her criticisms were reflections of something happening within her (outer reflections of her own inner critic), and were not about him doing anything wrong.

As Joe witnessed Sue’s flood of tears, he was moved. Her anger and criticism now made

sense to him; they were driven by her own unresolved grief, as well as her caring for him. I asked, as I often do, how it felt to be with her right now. Joe said it felt good to hear Sue's authentic feelings; he felt very close to her right now. The connection was palpable. Remembering that Sue had often complained that she was not being heard, I asked her, "Do you feel that you're being heard by Joe right now?" She tenderly looked at him and nodded her head affirmatively.

This exchange became a template for how this couple connected by sharing the more tender, vulnerable feelings that existed beneath surface, defensive, or secondary emotions. It exemplifies how change happens as a couple learns to tolerate the discomfort of lingering on the "relational edge." As psychotherapist Glenn Fleisch explains it, "The relational edge is that space wherein our already held understandings and implicit (bodily sensed) knowing converge or cross, and where something 'more' could be felt and carried forward" (Fleisch, 2006, p. 3). As Sue contacted the "more" that existed within her, something shifted between them. And this led to Joe sharing more about how he was feeling hurt by her criticisms and how he longed for tenderness from her.

The limbic brain and nervous system do not change quickly. It took many sessions such as this one for this couple to understand each other more deeply. Trust gradually grew and they felt safer with each other, though not without setbacks. I often tell a couple to expect setbacks, which can ease their sense of discouragement when they occur.

Some couples therapists might maintain that working individually with one partner is best done in individual therapy. I regularly encourage my couples to see individual therapists in order to further explore what comes up in our couples sessions, as well as excavate other issues that are more appropriate for private therapy. However, many clients cannot afford both individual and couples therapy. In the above example, Sue might benefit in individual therapy by getting support to explore her grief rather than brace herself against it, which limits her capacity to love and be loved. Joe might explore how he shuts down at the slightest hint of criticism. However, even without individual therapy, they are both likely to make progress with these issues through couples therapy. And there are additional advantages to working with one person during a session.

## ADVANTAGES OF WORKING WITH ONE MEMBER OF THE COUPLE

My experience suggests four distinct advantages in using focusing with one of the partners in front of the other person. Firstly, such individual attention can be powerful in *eliciting underlying issues*. The deeper issues that have impact upon a couple may only surface by taking time to help one person go deeply within. Couples therapists often probe for underlying issues, but oftentimes do not give the kind of space, time, or tools necessary to allow deeper feelings and insights to emerge from within the client. The focusing process is structured in a way that invites experience to unfold. This tends to mitigate familiar defenses.

Secondly, working with one partner in front of the other can *foster safety and trust*. An observing partner is usually relieved that they are not the focus of the other's usual attacks.

They begin to trust that I will intervene when things get uncomfortably heated or overwhelming and that I will not allow them to attack each other. As they recognize that I will ask them to gently take responsibility to look within themselves to see what is really happening, they gradually begin to catch themselves when they start to blame or accuse. As a result, safety and trust have an opportunity to grow. This often takes time, and does not fit neatly into the limited number of sessions permitted by managed care.

A third effect relates to *modeling*. In Focusing-Oriented couples therapy, I am modeling how to be with someone in a gentle, caring way. Clients may notice the nonjudgmental, warm, curious attention I am giving to the other through experiential listening — hearing the feelings and meanings that are being expressed. Little by little, this way of being with another gets absorbed by the client. This is not to suggest that I encourage clients to use focusing with each other at home (this is often too difficult when issues are about the other person), but rather that my modeling naturally helps them apply some of this way of attending to each other. At times I may invite them to say back to their partner what they are hearing. This offers practice in experiential listening while helping them feel heard.

A fourth effect of working with one partner in front of the other is that it can *deepen intimacy*. Clients get to experience what it is like to connect when they can contact and speak from deeper layers of themselves. Through sharing of their actual feelings and needs, they come to understand each other in fresh ways. Defenses become less necessary as the foundation for trust and connection strengthens. Couples enjoy more intimacy as they begin to experience increased awareness, sensitivity, and empathy toward themselves and each other.

As couples sample what is possible they are motivated to continue interacting in this way at home, though they often need help for some time. Reversion to old patterns can happen quickly. When things are just starting to get better they are most at risk of regressing. Couples are often looking for evidence that the relationship is not working, which may reinforce their life story that love just does not work. The premature leaving of therapy is a setup for failure. Just as antibiotics continue to be necessary even after symptoms disappear, it is often helpful to continue forward momentum by reinforcing the current gains. The early renewal of trust is a fragile shoot tentatively emerging from the ground. There is risk involved in allowing ourselves to feel close and happy. Suspending defenses and *letting in* another person implies a deeper loss if things do not work out. Defenses serve to protect us from getting closer as a way to protect us against the pain of loss. Yet the very defenses that keep us safe also keep us isolated.

## SUPPORTING THE COUPLE'S INTERACTION

A hallmark of Focusing-Oriented couples therapy is to bring attention to the partners' interaction, which helps them recognize how they affect each other. They come to appreciate that they have the power to make the relationship better or worse. By becoming more aware of what works and cultivating interpersonal skills, both individuals can do their part to create a more intimacy-friendly climate. For example, partners can let each other know that they

are being heard by reflecting back what each is feeling, wanting, or perceiving. They can replace blame and criticism with deeper expressions that derive from their felt sense. They can reveal how they are being affected by each other.

Janet Klein, a focusing teacher who created *Interactive Focusing*, encourages people to create a positive feedback loop as they employ the focusing attitude in their interactions. “After the first person has talked from the felt sense about an issue, the second person reflectively responds and then speaks from his/her own felt sense of what is going on for him/her in the moment about that issue” (Klein, 1994, p. 17). When applied to couples, this exchange can have a powerfully supportive and nurturing effect. As one person expresses their felt sense about something, the other senses how it affects them to hear that. This is then expressed in a gentle, focusing kind of way. Their partner may then notice how it feels to hear this, and what it touches in them — and so on. A trained therapist may help clients learn how to communicate in this intimacy-building way.

## CONTRAINDICATIONS FOR FOCUSING-ORIENTED COUPLES THERAPY

Focusing-oriented couples therapy is not for everyone. I use it to varying degrees with couples. Sometimes I mainly listen, reflect back what I hear, offer them new ways of seeing or understanding each other, or make practical suggestions about how they might connect better. Also, there are times when couples counseling may not be as helpful as individual therapy. When one or both partners has poor ego strength, has difficulty opening up, or is not self-reflective, they may not yet have the capacity to connect with their tender side, let alone show any vulnerability to each other. The work then proceeds slowly. I may use cognitive and behavioral approaches to help them understand and accept themselves, as well as explore new behaviors. I may make referrals to individual therapists to help them get more connected to themselves. If the partners cannot afford both individual and couples therapy, they may be encouraged to pursue individual therapy for some time before continuing with couples counseling. If there are situations of domestic violence or abuse, I refer to individual therapists.

Focusing involves taking time to attend to an inner bodily felt sense so that something new has an opportunity to emerge. Some clients feel disengaged or get bored if too much time — or even any time at all — is spent helping one partner to explore more deeply what is happening. This disengagement can sometimes be dispelled by a clear explanation of the value of working in this way, but nevertheless some couples may need a more interactively engaging style, especially if Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) appears to be present in one or both of the partners.

I encourage clients to tell me if they begin to feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the work so that we can address that. I also monitor as closely as possible any disruptions of trust they might experience with me. Gendlin frequently makes the crucial point that the relationship between therapist and client comes first. It is vital not to impose anything on clients, but rather work in a collaborative manner.

## SUMMARY

Focusing-Oriented couples therapy offers a powerful way to guide couples toward deeper layers of their authentic feelings and longings. At times, focusing will be used for varying lengths of time with one member of the couple as a way to explore blocks, reduce defenses, and uncover authentic feelings and wants that are not readily accessed. This process often leads to a deeper felt sense of intimacy in the room. Care is taken to ensure that the observing party is comfortable being a witness to his or her partner's unfolding process. Checking in regularly with this person helps keep them engaged in the process. Also, private attention is reasonably balanced between the partners so that one does not conclude that they are the main problem in the relationship.

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