

**THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDE
IN FOCUSING AND FOCUSING ORIENTED THERAPY**

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As a graduate student in pastoral psychology and counselling, I have been introduced to many different therapeutic approaches during my course of studies. They all have something to offer, however Focusing stands out as being very different from the others, both in its rationale and its methodology. Focusing is a process-oriented approach that is based on a person's inner experiences. When I first read about Focusing, I got the "sense" that there was something significant that I needed to pay attention to, but at the time, I did not know what it was.

It took some time for me to understand the process; what sounded so simple on paper did not translate into practice. Gradually it dawned on me why I was having difficulty – my attitude was all wrong! I was approaching Focusing much like an intellectual exercise instead of allowing my body to guide me in the process. Over time, I discovered certain attitudes that helped me, the first of which is a welcoming attitude.

Welcoming

When Focusing, it is important to have a welcoming attitude towards the entire process, from start to finish. Eugene Gendlin, the originator of Focusing, states "it is important to accept every feeling that comes, not argue with it, not challenge it with preemptory demands that it explain itself Instead you approach the feeling in an accepting way" (Gendlin, 1978, p. 29). As one might suspect, this is not always easy to do. In a less than perfect world, it is tempting to want to shape the body's sense of a problem or situation, referred to as the *felt sense* (Gendlin, 1978), into something more appealing. A welcoming attitude includes the good and the bad, whatever shows itself.

Strangely enough, in welcoming the negative in a friendly way, “a climate of safety and receptivity” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 303) manifests itself which allows the feelings just to be there. From that, one is able to spend some time with the felt sense, “just keeping it company” (Cornell, 1996, p. 35). This too, is not easy to do in the fast-paced world we live in. Spend time with a feeling; you have got to be kidding! I have places to go, things to do! Yet, our feelings are crying out to be heard and acknowledged.

When I am welcomed into someone’s home, I have the sense that here is someone who wants to spend time with me rather than doing other things. If that someone is a friend, I know that I am accepted for who I am, the nice and not so nice parts of me. According to Carl Rogers (as cited in Purton, 2004), one of the conditions necessary to facilitate change in an individual is “the client experiences himself as being fully *received* (p. 130)” (p. 59). In Focusing, a welcoming attitude implies one “fully receives” whatever shows itself and makes a space for it. In Focusing Oriented Therapy, the therapist reflects back to the client what has been said in order to allow the client the opportunity to further enter their own experiencing. “It is a way of being as close as possible to someone without imposing something on them” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 46). That can have a profound effect on a client. It is the less than perfect parts of ourselves that make us human. If therapists are able to welcome clients just as they are, perhaps then, clients may be more willing to do so as well, for it is from this place that the potential for change comes. Anna Sands, once a client herself and the author of *Falling for Therapy: Psychotherapy from a client’s point of view*, has this to say about the relationship between client and therapist and the impact that may have on the client,

There is a sense of acquaintanceship rather than distance. When the client then

reabsorbs those darker aspects of herself, which will always inevitably be there, she will put them back in a way that is different, in an easier and less pressing place. (Sands, 2000, p. 90)

Ernesto Spinelli (2007) uses the terms, *being-with* and *being-for*, to describe the therapeutic encounter. Although he is speaking about existential psychotherapy, I believe these terms are applicable to Focusing and Focusing Oriented Therapy as well since all three are attempts to uncover and explore the **meaning** of what is being expressed. To be-with and be-for a client means the therapist respectfully accepts the client's worldview, rather than attempting to impose one of his or her own. When I first began Focusing, I had difficulty at times accepting the felt sense of a situation. I also remember the first time I was the listener in a Focusing partnership; I felt the urge to jump in and try to help in some way. Little did I know the way to help was to say nothing, other than to reflect back what was heard. Ann Weiser Cornell (1996) suggests just being with the feeling, just sitting down beside it, without the need to do anything more. When I am able to do that, I, like Anna Sands, experience "an easier and less pressing place".

Curious

It helps if one is able to approach Focusing with a healthy dose of curiosity. With Focusing, it is not about what I know; it is about what the felt sense has to teach me that I do not already know. Only then are the doors opened to new meaning. The same can be said of Focusing Oriented Therapy. Both of these are continually unfolding processes, seeking their own direction. Adopting a curious attitude as a therapist, allows me to drop any authoritative stance I may have and "give the expertise to the client's own ability to follow his or her inner experience" (Wagner, 2006, p. 48). In my first tentative steps to use

a Focusing approach with some clients in my practicum, I found this difficult to do. An authoritative stance was part of my life for many years as an elementary school teacher. Sometimes it takes effort to keep that from creeping into my work with clients. Realizing, at the experiential level, how powerful it is to let my felt sense guide me rather than relying solely on intellect is helping me to be more comfortable with uncertainty and opening me to the many and varied possibilities that are implicit in human experience.

Respectful

An attitude of respect is also important in Focusing and Focusing Oriented Therapy, as it is with all therapeutic approaches. *Respect*, as defined in *Merriam-Webster's Deluxe Dictionary*, is “to consider worthy of high regard, to refrain from interfering with.” Respect refers not only to clients themselves of course, but also to what clients have to say. In counselling, I can support the Focusing process best by reflecting back, as accurately as possible, what I have just heard. If I am in doubt, I must ask, for in seeking understanding we show respect for one another. Clarifying also helps the focuser to check for the rightness of words and images (Gendlin, 1996) and leads to forward movement.

It is not enough to have high regard for clients and the act of Focusing, it is also critical not to interfere with the process; in fact, “trying to impose your will on the felt sense is a exercise in pure futility” according to Cornell (1996) because then the process is shut down (p.22). Forcing particular words or images into a feeling, will “effectively smother it and prevent it from showing its real nature” (Gendlin, 1978, p. 59). Therefore, it helps to respect the body's own wisdom and let it do its work without interference.

Gentle

There is a gentle attitude in Focusing that is not necessarily found in some other approaches. Even the words and phrases, themselves, convey a sense of gentleness, such as “Would it be O.K. ...?”, “Could you ...?”, or “You might just ...”. Words such as these suggest rather than command. As a Focusing Oriented therapist, the intention is to gently invite the client to listen to the messages from one’s inner self rather than push the client in a particular direction. The gentler one can be with each step along the way, the more relaxed one becomes. As a person relaxes, a space is created for whatever needs to emerge in the moment.

I believe we are born to be in relationship; for me, that means in relationship to myself, others, and from my perspective, God. Focusing is a way to be in relationship with myself and the world around me. Focusing partnerships or Focusing Oriented Therapy are ways for me to be in relationship with myself and others. When I am in relationship with others, I affect them and they, in turn, affect me. It follows, then, that any gentleness in me will be responded to in some way by others. Just what that response is will vary from person to person and situation to situation. Nevertheless, I believe any gentleness on my part will impact the other in some way and it is so much easier to be gentle with others, if I am able to be gentle with myself. Focusing encourages me to be gentle with myself.

Patient

It has been said that “patience is a virtue”. That is certainly true when it comes to Focusing. In fact, Elfie Hinterkopf (1998) cites patience as one of the four critical attitudes necessary in Focusing. It can sometimes take awhile for a felt sense to come. I know this first hand because when I first began to practice, I was far too impatient. I

would wait expectantly for an image, a feeling, anything! There were times when nothing would come. At other times, a feeling would arise and rather than stay with it to see what it had to say, I would move on too quickly. By being in too much of a hurry, I missed golden opportunities to learn more.

It can be difficult to have patience in this fast-paced world of ours. There is often pressure to move quickly, but not so with Focusing. Instead one is encouraged to slow down and stay with a feeling rather than try to fix or solve a problem. In my desire to help others in counselling, I tended to rush the process and in doing so, robbed clients of their own experiencing. With time, I became more patient, allowing clients to set their own pace.

Trusting

It seems to me, it is easier to be patient in Focusing if one is able to trust in the body's wisdom. Cornell (1996) speaks of the body's "subtle level of knowing" (p. 3). Katje Wagner (2006) also speaks of having trust in what the body knows. Through the practice of Focusing, Wagner believes it is possible for individuals to gain "internal sources of information that open up pathways toward tangible change and beneficial outcomes" (p. 45). These words point to the *carrying forward* that Gendlin refers to. "Bodily sentience always implies a next move" (Gendlin, 1991, p. 258). However, in order to capture the last move, we first have to live in each of the others. "The actual coming of each has the effect of changing the whole, so that the next one can actually form – and imply a further step" (Gendlin, 1991, p. 258). The Focusing process provides the sources of information referred to earlier and the resulting shifts that occur allow individuals to be carried further by their experience. "One needs to respond to anything

new that might be better, more hopeful, more alive, more assertive, freer, gentler, any new move” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 275). These are inspiring words for me because I feel that is what I am being called to do as a pastoral counsellor.

Throughout my life, I have trusted in my belief that as humans, we are all in the “process of becoming”. Therefore, it is not difficult for me to accept the words of Hinterkopf (1998) that state our bodies have “a natural healing process that seeks wholeness, connectedness, and spiritual growth” (p. 88). Hopefully, by trusting in the Focusing process, I am able to get out of the way and allow the process to unfold on its own. This is especially true at times when nothing appears to be happening, or when the felt sense is so very vague. “Nevertheless, the therapist must assume and imagine that the client has a directly felt sense of the whole complexity of the problem, and the responses must be pointed at such a felt meaning” (Gendlin, 1968, Explicating the Felt Meaning section, para. 4). It can be difficult to trust the unknown and yet there is value in doing so. Trusting in one’s own experiencing, rather than relying on the judgment of others is the mark of a psychologically healthy person, according to Purton (2004).

Neutral

In existential phenomenology, no hierarchical assumptions are placed on anything the client says; everything is equally important. This is known as the rule of *horizontalisation* (Spinelli, 2007). I believe it is helpful to keep this in mind in regards to Focusing as well. By cultivating a neutral attitude, it is easier to accept whatever comes without placing any more importance on one feeling or another. The aim is to clarify rather than judge. In Focusing Oriented Therapy, for instance, I might say to a client,

“What is that like for you?” or “What is your experience of that?” in the hopes of getting clients to examine their own perceptions for themselves.

I must admit remaining neutral is not easy. If I’m with clients whose value system is very different from mine, I struggle sometimes to stay with them and my ability to listen and reflect is affected as a result. If I’m with clients whose value system is more in tune with mine, I have no trouble remaining present; nevertheless my listening and reflecting are still affected because I am tempted to reflect whatever reinforces our similarities. Neither is helpful.

Instead, I prefer to think of *Right View*, one of the steps on the Eight-Fold Path that leads to wisdom in Buddhist philosophy (Das, 1997). Tibetan wisdom says,

Let your mind flow, free from attachment to your belongings, ideas, agendas, schedule, passions – your very self identity, and develop the wisdom, self-detachment, and equanimity that realizes that all things are essentially equal. Each of us is unique, but we are not especially special; we are all interconnected notes in the same cosmic symphony. (Das, 1997, p. 103)

These words remind me that in Focusing, whether I am the focuser, the listener, the guide, or a Focusing Oriented therapist, I *stand apart* from the feelings expressed in the moment. Whatever it is I or someone else is feeling is not me or them but something separate. That knowledge is freeing because, now, I am not my feeling; a space has opened up between the two. Within that space, something new can emerge.

In today’s world of managed care, “therapeutic work is not seen as being with ‘people’ and ‘processes’ but with ‘problems’ and ‘treatments’” (Mearns & Cooper, 2005, p. 160). Unfortunately in my own practicums, I have encountered this attitude and

struggled at times to remain true to my own beliefs in such an atmospheric climate. One of the reasons I am drawn to Focusing Oriented and Existential Therapies is the fact that these are process oriented therapies in which people come first, not theories. “The attention to process acknowledges the lived intricacies, novelty, and vast diversity of human interaction and therefore offers no universal predictions, or encapsulating theories” (Madison, 2010, p. 200).

If I am to be seen as authentic by my clients, then it follows that I must respond to them in an authentic manner. Theory can sometimes get in my way if I allow it to take center stage, therefore once again, the words of Madison (2005) resonate with me: “the therapist gives up the pretense of knowing in advance and does not predict appropriate outcomes for the client, but rather remains democratic, descriptive, and exploratory” (p. 202). I find that if I’m focusing on anything other than the client and what is happening between us, I lose touch with my own experiencing. It is times such as these when I sometimes find myself working at getting the client to fit some pre-conceived notion of mine. Perhaps what is going on in the moment fits exactly with something I’ve come across in a book and therefore, if the client will only do such and such, all will be well. It reminds me of my early teaching days when I thought if parents would just do this or that, then the problem would be solved. It was only years later, when I had my own children, that I realized things were not that simple!

Focusing enables clients to respond from their **own** felt experiencing. If I am encouraging clients to stay in touch with their felt sense, then I must model the same behavior. Anna Sands, writing about her experience with psychotherapy, refers to this:

When a therapist thinks that the client feels envious or ashamed or angry, this is, in

theory, not projection, but accurate therapeutic insight. It may well be, but what happens if the therapist's insight comes only from outside – from lectures and textbooks – rather than from inside, through real awareness? It may be that the practitioner's understanding is not a part of his felt experience, but remains at a more superficial, verbal level. (Sands, 2000, p. 53)

What I have learned and continue to learn from lectures and textbooks has been invaluable to me on my journey; however, if it gets in the way of my being there for the client in an authentic way, then I have forgotten the wisdom in Gendlin's (1996) words, "a person is a who, not a what. *This* person is always this living one, in front of us. The person is always freshly there again, always more than ideas and procedures" (p. 172).

Open

It has been my experience that the more open I am to whatever comes in Focusing, the easier it is for a shift to come from a felt sense. I find that curiosity, trust, and openness sometimes intertwine and it is hard to distinguish one from another. McMahon ((1993) refers to this attitude of openness when he says, "when I'm surprised by grace, like the gift which can come through Focusing, I seem to catch glimpses of another world. It is a world where I am not in control but a greater Mystery happens within me" (p. 26). I, too, believe that a felt sense is a gift, an act of grace.

Two of my core beliefs are we are born to be in relationship and we are all in the process of becoming. These two beliefs are linked more to my spirituality than philosophy; although, I find myself naturally drawn to philosophers with similar views; perhaps that is why I was attracted to Focusing in the first place. For instance, I find Gendlin's use of the term, *the edge of awareness* (as cited in Madison, 2010), hints at

spirituality. “Focusing on the bodily implicit can connect us to a self-responding infinity, ‘... the edge of awareness. It comes between the conscious person and the deep universal reaches of human nature where we are no longer ourselves’ (Gendlin, 1984, p. 79)” (p.198). I believe each round of focusing is another step in an unfolding process of becoming all that we can be. For me, the enormity of that is profound. It is like a pebble dropped in the ocean; the ripples of which extend beyond in ever-widening circles. This image comes to me as I reflect on Gendlin’s use of the words, carrying forward, in other words, anything that leads to new life. In Focusing partnerships or in Focusing Oriented Therapy we are there for each other, “making the ongoing experiencing move forward more fully and broadly” (Gendlin, 1966, p. 240). This cannot happen unless there is a “genuine other person genuinely responding” to one another with their full range of feelings (Gendlin, 1966, p. 244).

It is the **way** in which one relates to another in Focusing Oriented therapy that I believe can be thought of as being spiritual in nature. Gendlin says “let us conceive of the individual as not fully formed sentient experiencing, and pay attention to it, respond to it, refer to it, and make room for it, even when silent and without shape” (Gendlin, 1966, p.245). As a counsellor, this is the equivalent of holding the client before me, not as he or she is now, but as they will one day be in their “process of becoming”. What do I mean by these words?

In order to answer I turn to the philosopher, Martin Buber who, in speaking about the *I-You* relationship said,

The relation can obtain even if the human being to whom I say You does not hear it in his experience. For You is more than It knows. You does more, and more

happens to it, than It knows. No deception reaches this far: here is the cradle of actual life. (Buber, trans.1970, p. 60)

However there is more. I believe Gendlin points to it when he says,

We all know, for example, the concrete sense of being looked at by another human being, when someone looks *at* us. It is the live, direct sense of existing in the ‘reality between’ ourselves and him, of being seen by him, and of meeting him in his seeing. (Gendlin, 1966, pp. 212-213)

This “looking at” brings to mind Emmanuel Levinas, the French philosopher, who spoke of the *responsibility* each of us has for one another as we look at one another’s face. This ethics of care that Levinas refers to goes beyond what we would normally think of when we think of caring. Levinas was speaking about a responsibility *for* the other. According to Levinas (as cited in Van Manen, 2002), “to meet the other, to see this person’s face, is to hear a voice summoning me. This is the call of the other” (p. 269). In my mind, this is similar to Buber’s *I-Thou* relationship. When I approach another with a Focusing attitude, I find I relate differently than I do without that attitude. I believe this has to do with the fact that I have entered an I-Thou relationship in which I am “not driven by any project other than to experience the other as an ‘I’” (Tantam & van Deurzen, 2005, p. 127). The boundaries between the two of us are blurred and we are now connected in some way, a “we are all in this together” sort of feeling. In such rare moments, I have had fleeting glimpses of the responsibility of caring that Levinas refers to. Words fail me at this point, other than to say such moments are grace-filled.

Humble

The beauty of Focusing is that it takes us out of our heads and into our bodies. In my experience, the more in touch I am with Focusing, the less my ego is involved. The less my ego is involved, the more humble I am. Focusing encourages me to let go of being right and instead, to be willing to question my own way of looking at things. Spinelli (1998) is adamant that therapists risk exposing their imperfections, rather than insist that they know it all. Gendlin would agree:

I need the client to see that I do not have trouble being wrong, indeed that I expect to be wrong much of the time. Once clients know this, it is easy for them to correct me, and tell me what does come inside when it is not what I thought. Then my interpretations cannot obstruct the process anymore, and they can help to open things. (Gendlin, 1996, p. 105)

In addition, I must never assume I know what it is like to have a similar experience to that of the focuser since each person is unique. By doing so, I am honoring the wisdom of their body while staying in touch with my own felt sense of the situation.

Hopeful

I find the more I practise Focusing, the easier it is to bring a hope-filled attitude to my practice. It might come as a surprise to some that something negative that comes up in Focusing can actually be positive; I must admit I was rather skeptical myself at first. It was only later that these words began to ring true for me:

When an individual expresses accurately for the first time how he is, just then and precisely in so doing he is no longer that way. The accuracy which he feels so deeply – the physically sensed release of the words which feel exactly right – this

very feeling is the feeling of change, or resolution, of experiencing moving a step forward. (Gendlin, 1966, p. 236)

My skepticism disappeared once I realized this for myself on an experiential level.

There is an attitude of optimism inherent in Focusing, “oriented toward a positive expectation of change” (Wagner, 2006, p. 47). The negative is viewed as something which is blocking a more positive process from emerging; therefore, there is always something positive implied in the negative. This fits with my own philosophy. I believe within each of us is a life force moving us toward the greater good. That attitude fills me with hope, not only for myself but for the world.

Focusing has also changed the way I look at the past as well. Whether I am Focusing alone or I am with a client, I am far less inclined to stay stuck in the past if that is what presents itself. Rather, my aim now is to move **beyond** so there is forward movement. By allowing ourselves to just be with the feeling for a time, rather than fighting what arises, we allow it to open up (Gendlin, 1996). In a Focusing Oriented approach to therapy, for instance, “the therapist does not have to know how it is possible for the ugly things to be ‘redeemed’; it is enough to have the attitude that everything has its place in the ongoing process of the client’s life” (Purton, 2004, p. 200). This fills me with hope that there is something better in store for all of us.

I am grateful that by approaching Focusing with the attitudes discussed in this paper, I have been able to witness for myself the difference it has made in my life and in my counselling practice. I am also grateful to the felt sense which told me years ago that there was something in Focusing that I needed to pay attention to – living proof that the body sometimes knows what the mind does not.

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