

The Body Knows the Way: A Focusing Approach to Working with Clients Facing Illness

Joan Klagsbrun, Ph.D.

EndFragment

Working with Sadness and Worry

Ellen is a 50 year old writer who had come to therapy to work on her feelings of confusion and distress when her teenage son fell into a serious depression and stopped going to school.. In therapy, she began to develop her confidence in the choices she made as a mother, felt more emotionally resilient and began to address her own self care, including checking out a nagging shoulder pain she had ignored for months during her son's crisis. Sadly, medical tests for what she thought was a minor issue, revealed a serious cancer.

Ellen arrived at her session in a state of shock and denial that quickly progressed into sadness. "How can this possibly be? I am a meditator. I eat well and exercise regularly. And then without a pause—" How will my husband parent our children alone if I die? And Timmy--he is just recovering from depression--how will he ever be able face this?" "How will any of us get through this?". I saw the desperation and grief in her eyes and felt intense sadness in my own chest,. I listened to grasp what she was experiencing and let her know we would work together to absorb this shock and find ways to make this do-able.

"I feel scared she said.. and shaky" her hands were trembling.

I reflected back and that she felt scared and shaky and wondered if that captured how it was for her in this moment-- inviting her into her embodied experience-- not her thoughts,

" Well", she corrected, "not shaky, more quivery like a kite that is flying around in the wind not well tethered and I am scared it will get out of control . One minute I am OK and hopeful I will have some years with a new treatment my doctors are recommending for me, and the next moment, I am imagining the worst ". I reflected what she said and wondered if she might imagine herself putting the kite down in the right place for a moment- safely tethered for now.

Yes she said, I am going to put the kite under my right foot (she stomped her foot) so it will stay in place. I could almost detect a half smile as she said this. Already there was a slight sense of release of this intense feeling of fear.

"So Ellen," I went on, "Except for this shaky quivery feeling, now nailed down for the moment, see if there is anything between you and feeling OK?"

She was quiet again and then reported that could sense an all over static--which she guessed was anxiety. I invited her just be next to it to see if anxiety seemed right or not. She found that the word 'worry' captured it more. I reflected the word "worry" back to her and wondered if there were a place in her body where she felt it most strongly. Often finding where and how something is held in the body helps to ground the client, and helps her feel

more embodied and centered. Ellen replied that she felt tingly all over, a kind of prickly sensation, that was most strongly located in her chest, and that her worry was both for her husband and how he would handle the weight of carrying her illness, as well as for her depressed son. Tears streamed down her face.

“So tears come and you wonder how David will deal with it all.. taking care of you and Timmy and Jed. Might we take that whole huge worry just for now and sense how it would be you to be without it?”. She imagined putting all the worry in large metal box on the front porch of her house. “You might notice how you are inside with those issues safely distanced for this moment to give you some respite”. “Well. I can breathe better she said –at least for now.”

I invited Ellen to take a minute’s vacation from the issues she had named wondered if she could find in her imagination a place to be just to take a rest before we worked on something. She went to a familiar beach and I could see her begin to relax by the release of tension in her hands and face and shoulders.

“As you are at the beach with all your senses open to the smells, the taste of the salty ocean and the sun on your face, you might notice how it feels in your body”, I suggested.

While imagery alone can be helpful, an embodied kinesthetic experience makes for a different level of integration. After a while, she described the feeling soothed by the sun and the breeze. I invited her to stay there to let that sense of being soothed enter into her body, so it would be a feeling she could return to when needed.

This process of Clearing a Space took only ten minutes but Ellen’s mood became much calmer. We were then able to explore the intense worry she felt that day. Her worry was present but seemed more contained. She had connected to the part of herself that was untouched by the illness. This “cleared space” became a resource for her that she was to use in later sessions, and throughout her illness.:

Many times, Ellen chose to start our sessions by Clearing A Space, a time for her to take an inventory of her fears or worries, and then get some distance from them. She remarked that the process “felt like removing layers of overcoats that had been weighing on me.” It gave her some satisfaction in being able to identify and isolate each fear, and to imagine placing each one at the right distance from herself. Just clearly seeing and saying what was burdening her at any moment felt liberating, and gave her a sense of control and release.

This sense of release is a common reaction in Focusing. By acknowledging instead of denying, by going into instead of pushing away from, a different way of framing the experience of pain or illness can emerge. Acknowledging what her body was carrying not only eased Ellen’s stress level, but also helped her to remember who she was without those burdens.

In a session a few months later, when she was in remission, thanks to a new protocol, she came in clearly upset saying “I just don’t know if I can do it”. She said that sentence a couple of times so I suggested “So there’s *something* you can’t seem to do”. I wondered what that something was. It

turned out to be the pressure she was putting on herself to be an exemplary cancer patient... one who found meaning and joy in each day, who was optimistic about the future and who functioned as if not in pain. She listened as I reflected these self-imposed, perfectionistic expectations back to her, and she actually laughed. “This one is not just an overcoat I am putting on myself, it is a straightjacket!” She was able over time to let go of the image of the ideal cancer patient, and to feel more OK about accepting of whatever she felt each day—including feeling deep grief that she would likely not see her sons grow. When a strong feeling of sadness or worry came up, Ellen learned that she could pause, and make a friendly space to hear from it. She noticed that she would feel a release in acknowledging what was there. As Gendlin put it: “What is true is already so. Owning up to it doesn’t make it worse. .. because it’s true, it is what is there to be interacted with. ... People can stand what is true, for they are already enduring it”. (Gendlin, 1981)

This is an excerpt from the chapter, ‘The Body Knows the Way: Working with Clients Facing Illness and Dying’ in [*Emerging Practice in Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*](#) 2014 Jessica Kingsley Publishers.