

Focusing Notes for Class discussion and Tutorials
The Karuna Institute, Franklyn Sills

The following notes are used at the Karuna Institute for review and clarification purposes. Anyone may use these notes if they find them helpful with acknowledgement of author and of the Institute.

Focusing

Focusing is a therapeutic enquiry developed by Dr. Eugene Gendlin and his staff at Chicago University. While working in the student counselling centre some important things became apparent to him. There were many kinds of psychotherapists working at the centre. These included the whole gamut of approaches and theories from classical psychodynamic therapies, to humanistic therapies like Gestalt, to transpersonal therapies. In consultation with colleagues, Dr. Gendlin noticed something important. It did not seem matter to what kind of therapy was offered, or even the theories involved. Students got better not because of the therapy or belief system employed, but because of something that they were doing internally. It seemed that certain students were able to internally process their experiences within the sessions better than others. Dr. Gendlin headed a research project which set out to discover if this was true and, if it was, if the skill could be taught to others. The focusing process developed out of that research. Focusing has helped a multitude of people over the last thirty years. It is a skill that can be used within any kind of therapeutic context and is really a life skill rather than a specific therapy process.

Focusing makes some important inner skills available to both practitioner and client. Focusing attends to what Dr. Gendlin called the *felt sense*. A felt sense is a global sense of something. It is not just physical, but is composed of sensations, emotional tones, feeling senses and even images. It is the unclear, whole *bodily* sense of something. It is an expression of how we embody our experience. It is a realm within which allows access to how we hold meaning in an embodied way. One important thing about the felt sense is that, initially, it is usually unclear. It is like waking up from a sleep and sensing a feeling tone of something left over from a dream. You might at first struggle to name it, but when you do there is an "ah ha!" experience. The following is a brief summary of the process. I must refer you to Dr. Gendlin's book, *Focusing* for a much more complete description. The classical focusing approach entails learning six movements or steps which, once internalised, become one fluid process.

Entering Your Body Space

The first thing that you do in the focusing process is to find your way into your *body* space. The intention is to be inside your body with awareness from the top of your neck to your pelvic floor. This is *the embodied realm of the felt sense*. It is within this body space that access to the embodied meaning of our experience can be accessed. The focusing process will only work if you have a relationship to the feeling tones held within this body space. It is where the "all-about-ness" or the "whole of something" is held and experienced. To paraphrase the Buddha, when your awareness is held *within* your body space, you can be with the feeling tone *within* the feeling tone (i.e. not dissociated from it)

Some suggestions to help you enter your body space:

- Try following your breath into your body and its sensations. As you inhale follow the, feeling sense of your breathing into your body space.
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- An alternative is to "inhale" your way into your body from the bottom up. To do this imagine that You have nostrils on the soles of your feet and as you inhale imagine/sense that you are drawing your breath from the soles of your feet up your legs into your abdomen.

Accessing a Felt Sense

There are a number of perceptual exercises which I use to help a person gain access to the realm of the felt sense. Let's explore one here. Sit in a comfortable position. Bring awareness to your body space. Use one of the suggestions

above if that is helpful. Now bring an image of a person, a memory, or a place or activity which you find *totally resourcing and positive*. Be a little wary about choosing a person as we commonly have mixed feelings about people. Bring this image to your body space. What do you notice as you do this? What are the qualities of feeling tone which arise? Where in your body do you sense them? Can you describe them?. Now shift the image. Bring an image of someone, or something, which you definitely do not like. You may have a strong aversion to this person, place, activity or thing. It can even be a historical figure. Notice the change within your body space. Does the sense of the feeling tone change? What is the quality of the new feeling tones? Can you describe them? Now, staying within your body space *again* shift to the totally resourcing image. Can you again sense the shift in feeling tone? What is this like now?

The Felt Sense is:

- a global sense of something.
- is not just physical, but is composed of sensations, emotional tones feeling senses and even images.
- is accessed within our body space.
- is the unclear, whole *bodily* sense of something.
- is an expression of how we *embody* and give meaning to our experience.
- is it is usually unclear, hard to grasp or name.

The Focusing Movements

Movement One: Clearing Space

The intention of this first movement is to bring attention to your inner sense of significance, concern, or disquiet. It is about sensing the inner issues which are held as bodily tones or senses within your mind-body matrix. Bring attention to your inner body space as suggested above. Bring an enquiry to your mind-body system by floating the question, "what's important here?", or, "What is of concern here?" As a concern arises, do not go inside it, simply note that it is there. See if you can create space between you and the concern. As concern, disquiet, issues, etc. arise, perhaps imagine/sense that you are putting them aside or outside of yourself. Perhaps put them on an imaginary shelf from which you can retrieve them later, or place them in a bubble and let them float away. Perhaps the simple act of acknowledgement is enough. Sometimes it helps to make a list of them in order to clear your inner space. As each concern arises make space, ask the question again and then wait awhile to see what else arises. Follow this process as many times as necessary as you allow space to arise. The intention is to *clear inner space* so that you can engage in an enquiry into *one* specific issue or concern. This helps uncouple it from others and allows a specific enquiry into the felt sense of a particular concern. This is also a great process to use on its own. It does help you access a sense of inner spaciousness.

Movement Two: Accessing the Felt Sense

The felt sense is the realm of the unclear, whole bodily sense of our mind-body process. It is a realm of meaning. It is the whole sense of something which includes *meaning* and the felt energies of experience. It is also a realm where intuitive, holistic information is available and accessible. It is a realm where the co-arising nature of reality can be appreciated. Unresolved issues, concerns and qualities of disquiet will be held within the body as feeling tones or felt senses which contain the meaning of the issue or concern. They will be experienced within the felt sense realm as unclear feeling tones. The felt sense realm also contains all the information necessary to resolve the inner conflict or concern. Thus as you bring awareness to this realm, it is seen that the concern or problem unfolds into its own answer. Thus the felt sense is not necessarily about something difficult or traumatic. It is *a feeling realm* which holds meaning and can be accessed via a natural movement of awareness. Personal issues and/or felt senses will arise spontaneously within sessions as part of a person's process. When they do, focusing becomes incredibly useful. Here we will choose a particular issue or concern in order to learn the process.

One way to access the felt sense is to bring a particular concern or issue into your body space. Select one of the concerns discovered in the first movement. Bring it to your body as an image, memory or sensation. Let yourself soften into the issue as you become aware of its *felt sense* within your inner body space. Allow an unclear sense of "All of that" to arise. This will be a tonal quality which is within the body, but is not just physical. It is a combination of body, mind and feeling states which are the *embodied* sense of the issue you are exploring. See if an unclear feeling sense arises. Remember that even feeling tones which seem empty and blank, or sensations of numbness and immobility may be part of the overall felt sense of something. The next step is to try to get a *handle* on this often nebulous quality.

Movement Three: Getting A Handle

Felt senses are commonly unclear, nebulous and difficult to grasp. As we have seen, the felt sense is not just physical, but is a matrix of feelings, mental tones and physical sensations. The process of *getting a handle* helps to clarify the felt sense and invites its meaning to speak to you directly. As you become aware of the tonal qualities which are arising in relationship to the issue being explored, see if you can find a word, phrase or image which gives you a handle on the felt sense. Don't try to find a handle, don't look for a handle. *See if the handle arises from the bodily sense of the concern.* Let the body speak to you, let the felt sense clarify itself to you. See if you can allow the *embodied* sense of the concern to speak to you. The handle helps you access the *meaning* of the felt sense or feeling tone which arises in relationship to the concern being explored.

Movement Four: Resonating

See if the word, phrase or image *resonates* with the felt sense. Bring the handle to it within the body and see if it fits, or resonates. This is like an "ah ha!" kind of experience. If the handle fits the felt sense, it will feel right, it will resonate with it. Once you access this handle, and have a sense of its resonance with the felt sense, simply be aware of it within your body space.

Movement Five: Asking

Once you have a handle, the next step is to enquire into it. This is the step of *asking*. It is basically an act of awareness. It is about actively bringing awareness to the handle and the felt sense. It is an enquiry. "What is this for me?", "What is important here?", "Is this the whole of it?", "Is this the worst of it?". Let whatever arises enter your body space and see how the felt sense of the concern or issue speaks to you. As this enquiry continues you may sense a *felt shift*, a change in the felt sense which tells you something has been processed. You may experience expansion, relief, insight, as the energies of the felt sense shift. They may even fully resolve or evolve into something else. You can check if the felt sense has shifted by simply bringing the handle back to it. If there has been a shift, the handle will not fit anymore. It will not resonate with the felt sense.

Movement Six: Receiving

Receiving is really not so much a final step, but a chance to acknowledge the process that has occurred, a time to put a hold on things for now, like a punctuation mark in a longer story. It is also a time to fully take in and integrate the insights or shifts which may have arisen within the focusing process. This last movement allows recognition and acknowledgement of the process. Let yourself receive and acknowledge the process as it is. Receive anything that the felt sense and the process of enquiry has offered you. Acknowledge any felt shifts. You can also go back to the *clearing space* step above to set aside any unresolved issues, feeling tones and concerns.

If you want to learn more about focusing, I recommend finding a focusing teacher or group to work with. Focusing tuition is available in North America and Europe and, I expect, in many other locations.

Working with the Felt Sense

I find the focusing process very useful in session work. When clients encounter feeling tones and sensations which either call to their awareness, or are uncomfortable and challenging, the focusing process can be extremely useful. I generally don't teach the process to patients in a formal way, but introduce the focusing movements as they become appropriate within the sessions. It is truly magical to be in the presence of a person who connects with the inner meaning of a seemingly difficult or challenging feeling, sensation, or mental process. It generates option and possibility and liberates energy for healing splits and fragmentation. It helps to liberate the cycling energies that have become caught up in maintaining fixed positions and rigidified processes. It gets *under* habitual mental, emotional or psychological processes and brings us to a deeper level of body-mind organisation.

Franklyn Sills, the Karuna Institute

"Focusing"

by Eugene Gendlin,

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Focusing Institute

info@focusing.org

