



IFL Reflections

THE INSTITUTE OF FAMILY LIVING

Our Forty-Fifth Year

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Focusing: A Path to Healing

IFL therapists have many modalities that we seek to use in therapeutic interventions with our clients. This article is the result of a conversation between two of our therapists, Nancy Molitz and Lindsay Watson. Trained by Eugene Gendlin and Mary Armstrong, long-time director of Centre for Focusing in Toronto, Nancy integrates focusing in her work with clients.

Question: What is focusing?

Focusing is a natural, intuitive process of inner knowing, embraced in bodily or somatic sensation. It is a kind of inner self-awareness that leads to emotional healing and integration. Focusing helps someone become in touch with something deeper than the analytical mind. A safe space for new possibilities is created, and open attention is applied to something that may not be expressed in words.

Question: How did the art of focusing develop?

Focusing is a psychotherapeutic process developed by Eugene Gendlin in the 1960s. Through his background in philosophy and psychology he explored what it was that contributed to the success of psychotherapy for some clients but not for others. What happened when a client experienced change?

Through analysis of the process of change across

many modalities of psychotherapy, he noticed that some people became less articulate and seemed to struggle to express themselves verbally.

They were, in fact, paying attention to sensations and feelings in their bodies rather than remaining cognitively focused in their heads. In order to help clients connect to deeper cognitive awareness and facilitate healing, he developed the process called “focusing.”

Question: How do we experience the process of focusing?

It is often experienced as a vague, unclear sensation, which is felt viscerally and is called the “felt sense.”

By staying with the felt sense, a feeling gradually comes into focus and brings clarity to the question or issue one is struggling with. Focusing is an unfolding process that in fact integrates both hemispheres of the brain.

In the mindful self-awareness that focusing generates, mental discernment becomes more refined and we live more in graciousness of heart, thus causing less harm to self and to others.

Question: Is focusing similar to mindfulness?

The process of focusing is similar to mindfulness in many ways.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a behavioural medical doctor and a leading proponent of mindfulness practice, stated: “the universe

of the body holds infinite healing capacity.” Mindfulness is a special form of directing attention with a welcoming curiosity.

Gendlin expressed it this way: “If there is something bad, sick, or unsound, let it inwardly be and breathe. That is the only way it can evolve and change into the form it needs.”

Both mindfulness and focusing help to access that attentive capacity.

They are both ways of “holding” thoughts and experiences without either directing or being directed by them.

Question: What is involved in the process of focusing?

To try focusing, give yourself some protected time and quiet space in a spirit of openness, curiosity, and unknowing.

- ✓ Pay attention to the sensations in your body, your throat, chest, and stomach.
- ✓ Then ask yourself the question: “What wants my awareness now?”
- ✓ Acknowledge anything that comes up. There is no right answer.
- ✓ When you notice a feeling or sensation, be curious and welcoming, listening to its own language, which comes from within, the felt sense.
- ✓ Let yourself sit with the feeling and allow it to expand in meaning.
- ✓ Check if it feels right.

In noticing and acknowledging, you are close enough to the knowing but not so overwhelmed by the feeling.

Change usually comes in small steps and in realizations that cause a physical reaction in the body called the “felt shift.”

Movement from felt sense to felt shift brings deep muscle relaxation, a sense of relief, new insights, and often comfort even when the distressing situation is not yet resolved. Becoming more deeply aware of the memories, feelings, sensations we carry in ourselves allows us the freedom to move forward and to release what we need to in order to embrace positive energy and healing.

In conclusion, focusing is an integrative, experiential, therapeutic technique, supporting positive change and growth.

The six steps are best practiced with an experienced facilitator and can be used in conjunction with many other therapies in the treatment of grief, trauma, depression, and anxiety. Once learned, it is a life-long tool for self-awareness and a bridge to touch our innermost self, that “still small self,” which is full of wisdom and blessing.

by Nancy Molitz RMFT and Lindsay Watson RMFT

WHO WE ARE

I FL continues to serve a broad and diverse community. We serve several Employee Assistance Plans; our referral network draws from clergy, physicians, social workers, teachers, principals, friends, and former clients.

I FL is the umbrella under which a multi-disciplinary team of professional associates and consultants work collegially in individual private practice. We are an inclusive and interdisciplinary community of Christian and Jewish therapists; we encompass clinical psychologists (including child and adolescent learning assessments), registered marriage and family therapists, a family mediator, a GP psychotherapist, and an intern (the latter two also work with low-income persons).

For inquiries or to seek a therapist, please leave a message in our general mailbox at 416-487-3613. Our telephone receptionist, Betsy Barlow, will return your call.

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For Further Reading:

Gendlin, E.T. *Focusing. 2nd Edition.* Bantam, 1981.

Kabat-Zinn, J. *Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future.* Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice (June 2003): 10(2) 144-156.

Weiser Cornell, A. *The Power of Focusing: A Practical Guide to Emotional Self-Healing.* New Harbinger Publications, 1996.

May the love of life fill our hearts.
May the love of earth bring joy to heaven.
May the love of self deepen our souls.
May the love of neighbour heal our world.
As nations, as peoples, as families this day
may the love of life heal our world.

J. Philip Newell

“Only in the present moment can one really touch life... The deeper you look, the more you will discover, because in you is the source of wisdom, of understanding and of wakening, you only need to touch it.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, Steps of Mindfulness, 1998

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We welcome your comments.