

Listening to the body's wisdom

Fiona Parr talks with **Amy McCormack** about using Eugene Gendlin's Focusing technique in the therapy room

First of all, please could you explain what Focusing is?

Focusing was developed by Eugene Gendlin in the 1950s and 60s. He was carrying out research with Carl Rogers to work out what makes therapy successful. They recorded hundreds of hours of client sessions and listened back for what brought something fresh, some forward movement in therapy. He discovered that when a client got to an unclear edge, they would become inarticulate, and say, 'I just need to find the word. It's not anger, it's not disappointment, but there is something there.'

By focusing on that moment, something new would come and that carried a forward step towards something that was not in the space before. And then, they might say, 'Actually, it's not that at all, it is this thing that is connected to how I felt as a child.'

He observed that this brought a shift in the body and in how the whole thing felt and was experienced.

How did you learn Focusing?

It started in 1990, a long time ago. I had been doing a lot of travelling around

Australia and New Zealand, teaching Balkan and gypsy dance, a form of sacred circle dance, and also meditation and groupwork, having trained at Findhorn in the 1970s. I also taught local groups in Devon. I really enjoyed it, but it was too much for me. I held a lot of it on my own. I had no support and was working with people in a powerful and transformative way. There was no formal supervision then.

A friend of mine suggested Focusing could help. At first I did a course, which was good, but I did not really get the hang of it. My friend persisted and suggested I attend her practice group. For 18 years, I attended fortnightly, and it was really supportive, especially as I had not had a lot of support before. When I had the opportunity to train in something in 2000, out of the many possible therapeutic interventions out there, Focusing was the one that spoke to me.

What made you choose Focusing?

It had given me so much and it was immediately accessible, both to me and to others. I really wanted to pass that on so that people could do it for themselves. It is a very democratic

process. You don't have to pay a therapist. You can do swap sessions with other Focusers, and get support and safety from that. It is empowering for people.

How did you merge the two together?

I went on to train as an integrative counsellor in 2010. I wanted to add in counselling and therapy to my work as a Focusing practitioner. I find that my Focusing experience very much enhances my work as a counsellor. I was really looking for the experiential part of the counselling experience. That is the place I go to quite naturally. The place of merging and integrating them both is relational. The felt sense is my guide for what to say next.

What does Focusing look like in the therapy room?

The relationship is one of the key aspects in therapy. Working with Focusing in therapy is about bringing the client's presenting issues into a relational aspect, where there's another person there who is present, aware and grounded. It is out of that interaction that something new can come. It's about listening out for the implicit – what's not yet been spoken – and supporting the client's ability to explicitly symbolise what is on the edge of awareness. It is about exploration and open curiosity. It is also about not shying away from what is unclear, or not yet known, but actively being curious and moving towards it.



Some clients, particularly those with trauma, can feel quite afraid of their felt sense, and wary of moving towards the unknown. How is Focusing approached in these situations?

It always has to be with the agreement of the client. For me, the first guideline is, ‘...if they don’t want to go there, don’t go there’. Part of Focusing is to ask the question, ‘Does this feeling want to be approached?’ It is very respectful, non-pushy, and senses tentatively how far into something we go, how far feels comfortable for now. People will also move in and out of their exploration, perhaps by talking about something else, or deciding to stop, and I totally respect all of those ways and means of stopping.

It sounds like a very respectful process

It is. I use my own felt sense, as part of what’s happening relationally, and sense when to share something from that and when not to. Sometimes, it is worth taking a risk and backing up if it does not work. If you back up and say it’s not right, the client knows they are in control of things and they are not going to be pushed along by the therapist. There needs to be trust between you, and the client needs to be able to trust their own inner, grounded experience. It’s about supporting the client’s external awareness and resourcing first, asking them to become aware of the space around them, their hands and feet – that connection. Some clients feel that they

have got nowhere to stand, nothing there to hold them up, and those are very clear warning signs that it is very hard for them to find their grounded presence.

In therapy, we sometimes encounter blocks and resistance. Things get ‘stuck’. How do you work with that in Focusing?

Eugene Gendlin said that ‘...there must be stuck and empty space and time for the client’s inwardly impelled process

It’s about listening out for the implicit – what’s not yet been spoken – and supporting the client’s ability to explicitly symbolise what is on the edge of awareness. It is about exploration and open curiosity. It is also about not shying away from what is unclear, or not yet known, but actively being curious and moving towards it

to arise’.¹ It’s very uncomfortable for people when it feels stuck, and when there are blocks, because we naturally try to get rid of them. We want to go somewhere, or there’s an urgent need for healing, or something feels

desperate. Something new comes from that eventually. You just have to wait and then something comes that you could not have predicted or expected. You find a little green patch to stand on where it has all been dark. Tolerating frustrations and difficulties is something that comes with practice, over time, and if a client moves away, I follow them in moving away. I’ll say, ‘Maybe that’s enough for now’, and I trust that if they need to come back to it, then they will either do so in the session, or in another session.

I get the sense that there is something about a change of pace. Can you tell me a little more about how that is useful as a tool in the therapeutic process?

I want to make space for the client’s ‘inwardly arising process’.² That takes more time than thinking. I am looking for the experiential dimension. It’s not enough just to know something. It needs to be experienced and lived in the body. If there is emotion there, then it might be easy to find where they can feel it in the body, a tightening chest, for instance, and you can ask, ‘Where do you feel that the most?’. It is easier with an emotion than with a thought. But they are two sides of the same coin: thought on one side, feeling on the other.

How does Focusing differ from mindfulness?

I teach Focusing to mindfulness teachers in India and they notice the body and

how things arise and then pass. In Focusing, you stay there. If it shifts, you go back to it. Focusing is staying there, staying with something, being curious about the unclear edge of the felt sense. It's sometimes not easy to stay with the feeling, but you can follow the thread, allow the felt sense to open, and wait for a shift into a life-forward direction.

Staying with a feeling is different from being in a feeling, because it can be overwhelming to be in a feeling. The key is to stay with it enough that you can have some distance from it and say, 'How are you in relation to that feeling?' It's about the whole feel of it and where you are standing in relation to that. You can move towards it, find out more about it, but not go into it, not become merged with it.

Focusing is usually done with a partner. Why is that?

It is extraordinary how the presence of another person makes such a huge difference. With the presence of another, something more can come, something new. The relational side is really crucial, just as it is in any talking therapy.

Gendlin talked about how we find Focusing very powerful when alone, but easier to do deeply when another person silently keeps us company and receives anything we do say. This is a pure instance of interpersonal carrying forward. In silence, only the receptive attention of another person is added.

How would you use Focusing as a spiritual tool?

Focusing naturally lends itself to supporting spiritual practice by developing the capacity for grounded, aware presence and empathy for yourself and others.

I find when I am practising meditation, for instance, I can sense where there is holding going on in the body and when I am in my flow. In nature, I can sense exploration and connection, and when I am in my Focusing practice, it goes the other way; the more present I can be,

the more grounded awareness I can bring and the more my Focusing can flow. They are interconnected.

On a spiritual level, where do you think that 'inner knowing' comes from?

This is something that each person can enquire into. You can test it out; how do you know what you know? How do you know what is true for you? You might revisit past experiences, or sense right now where your inner knowing comes from. On a personal level, I go to my bodily felt experience. For instance, if I go for a walk in nature, I naturally feel a sense of calm, expansiveness and ease. I feel it and experience it. Likewise, in meditation. I know, because I experience it. That is inner knowing.

How do you think the body comes to hold such insight?

In my view, the word 'body' is shorthand for 'body-mind organism'. It contains the whole of your life experience, of who you are in your life situation. It's about not differentiating the body from the mind, not separating them off.

When something feels heard, it can relax and settle. It is the same as in therapy. If something feels really hard and you talk about it, there is an easing there. It's about being in relationship with my present experience and asking what my relationship is to it.

How might therapists introduce this technique into their practice?

It is not a technique that you use on your clients. It is about learning this for yourself and getting much more familiar with your own body, and your own felt sense being called into the relational space. Then you do notice when the client is on the edge of something and become more alert and open to things that are not yet spoken. It is more a specific way of listening that generates new steps of change in, what we would term in Focusing, a 'life-forward' direction.³ This is an experience of change during therapy, which is concretely felt, and brings a positive

How to get started with Focusing

Try this practice:

Take a minute or two to become grounded in your body and present in your experience. Notice how you are feeling. What is your subjective inner experience? Now notice what your relationship is to that experience. Can you be kind and accepting of whatever you are experiencing now?

For more information about Focusing and how to learn the skill, please see: www.focusing.org.uk

impact on the client's life. For instance, if you are hungry, a life-forward step would be to have some food.

Although we cannot predict what those steps of change will be, we can provide the right conditions for spontaneous growth and change to happen. The most important thing is to really understand Focusing for yourself, and then you can share it with your clients.

Biography



Fiona Parr is a registered member of BACP, a Focusing-oriented therapist, and Certifying Coordinator for The International Focusing Institute (TIFI). She teaches the British Focusing Association (BFA) Focusing Skills

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References

¹ Gendlin ET. The client's client: the edge of awareness. In: Levant RL, Shlien JM (eds). Client-centered therapy and the person-centered approach. New directions in theory, research and practice. New York: Praeger; 1984 (pp76-107).

² Gendlin ET. The obedience pattern. *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 1984; 5(2): 189-202.

³ Gendlin ET. Beyond postmodernism: from concepts through experiencing. In: Frie R (ed). *Understanding experience: psychotherapy and postmodernism*. Abingdon: Routledge; 2003 (pp100-115).