

One Psychotherapist's Experiences with Focusing

Sally Phalan M.Sc.C.A.P.P.

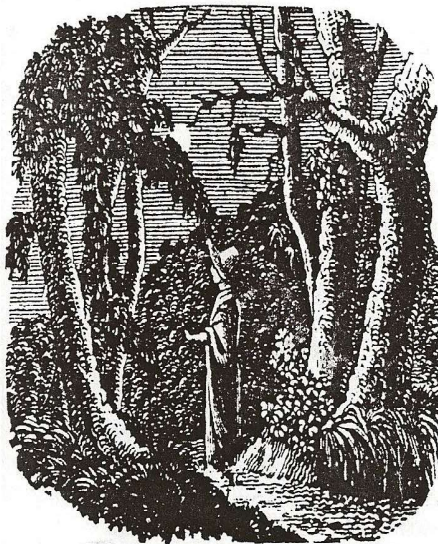
I began my training as a psychotherapist back in 1990. The professional training I chose to undergo was a psychoanalytic one, and very intensive. I threw myself into this, heart and soul, and more than fulfilled all the necessary requirements. At one point, in a single week, I was having three individual therapy sessions, as well as an individual supervision session, as well as attending a day of seminars. I certainly did learn a lot from my basic training.

However, I was not able to feel great satisfaction in my work as a therapist for several years after I trained. In the psychoanalytic approach, there is a lot of emphasis on understanding what is going on with a client, and conveying that in order to help the client achieve insight and make changes. I often felt that I hadn't quite grasped it. I worked hard at this work of understanding, but I frequently felt inadequate, not really clever enough to be a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.

Discovering Focusing

And then I discovered focusing. In 1998 I began to see Kathleen Kavanagh for individual sessions in order to train as a Focusing facilitator. I saw her weekly for the best part of a year and it was a fascinating experience. Kathleen somehow managed to combine teaching me to Focus, teaching me to teach my clients to Focus,

giving me supervision with my cases, and helping me to give myself some time to Focus with personal issues. At times it was frustrating to have so many agendas going all at once, but somehow it worked. I was fascinated when Kathleen shared some of her own experiences in helping people through Focusing, very impressed by how quickly and surely she seemed to be able to get to the nub of an issue with her clients. I read Gendlin's



books and articles with great delight and gradually a new dimension opened up for me in my work, a dimension which, to use focusing language, has continued to 'unfold' steadily. As a result of this, I enjoy a sense of creativity and freshness that has added enormously to the interest and satisfaction of my work as a psychotherapist.

Major shift

One major shift for me was that, in using this approach, I more and more situated the expertise within the client.

What a relief! I didn't have to work so hard trying to be so clever anymore. And what was better still, I saw I was helping my clients more efficiently, they were going deeper faster. I also really appreciated the safeguards built into the Focusing approach. I could put the responsibility on the client by telling them always to check out anything I said to see if it felt really OK inside. If not, they could just ignore it. What I was offering them might well be true, but if it didn't feel right then it wasn't useful for that person at that time, which was all that really counted. This gave me great freedom to be myself, because sometimes I do like to share insights with clients and sometimes they do feel them helpful, but if they don't, no harm is done.

I always say to my clients 'I am not the expert here, I don't know what you need, and as you've come to see me it seems as if you don't know either, but deep down inside of you is a place of wisdom that knows exactly. That is the expert in here, and you and I will work together to help you connect with that place inside yourself.' This approach is very empowering for clients, who often have low self esteem, and is healing in itself. Not surprisingly, I have had some clients who didn't take easily to Focusing, but I can say, without exception, that all my clients have benefited from the wonderful set of Focusing attitudes.

A path of love

Because in addition to the techniques involved in Focusing, I have found the Focusing attitudes invaluable. Focus-

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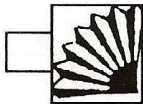
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ing is essentially a path of love, expressed by an attitude of compassion and perfect acceptance of self and others. Love is the healer. I find clients are constantly astonished, and at times initially outraged, when I suggest they 'welcome' a difficult or unpleasant feeling. They can understand how one might approach another difficult or hurting person with gentleness and acceptance, but this notion of giving love to the unwanted parts of themselves is very new. It never ceases to amaze them, and me, how this simple action of naming, accepting, and just fully 'being with' a wounded part of the psyche, without trying to change it or fix it, sets in motion a process of healing which may be sensed almost instantaneously.

The spiritual dimension

One problem that always intrigued me as a psychotherapist, was how to bring the spiritual dimension into my work. I found it such an important element in my own journey through life, but I realised that many of my clients did not share my beliefs and that it would not be correct to try to impose them in any way. For me Focusing has opened the way to bringing this aspect into my sessions with clients. My view of the human person is that we are essentially spiritual beings having a human experience. We are what has been called a 'quadrinity' of body, emotional self, intellect and spirit. I do not know any other approach to therapy that brings together these four aspects of our being into the one action, as Focusing does. I help my clients to connect with their 'felt sense', a subtle blend of embodied emotions, and then to bring their minds, their intellects, to bear as they ask 'it' to tell them more of what 'it' is about. They are guided by what they experience as wisdom, a deep knowing, that lies in the gut more than in the head, often making connections with older stories within their experience and moving step by step through a process of deep healing. I find that most of my clients have no difficulty in recognising and rejoicing in the presence of this spiritual level within them.

I love the surprise element in using Focusing. We think we have an agenda, but that deeper place of knowing often has its own idea. I also enjoy all the different ways in which

clients can use Focusing, with some it is a slow process, with others it moves with lightning speed. There are so many new approaches to healing available now, so much greater an awareness of the spiritual dimension of life, and I find that when clients have done previous personal work and have opened to this dimension, that they can make extraordinary progress very swiftly using Focusing.

Adding a new dimension

Focusing is the best approach I have discovered, and in addition to my psychoanalytic training I have done several other trainings. Each one has been valuable in its way, but I find Focusing has added a dimension to all of them. The more I develop along my own path in life, the deeper I find myself going with clients using Focusing.

Trained to work with clients on a one to one basis, I was nervous of handling more than one client at a time until I learnt Focusing. Focusing brings us in contact with our 'inner community', it allows each voice within to have its space to be heard, but also to respect the space of the other. Now I find it easy to work with two or more clients, for example, a couple, or a parent and child, making sure each one is loved and listened to, and helped to make that necessary space for the other in turn.

Interactive Focusing

Most recently, I have become really excited with using Interactive Focusing. Sometimes I work with parents who have severe marital problems and may even be separated. The challenge for them is to move on from a painful relationship as spouses or partners, to respecting each other and working together as joint parents in the best interest of their children. I help them to learn to listen to each other, to really listen, and to take responsibility, in turn, to speak in such a way as to be truly heard by the other. This is such a challenge, but the structured approach of Focusing really really works. Even in cases where parents get on with each other reasonably well, there are often communication difficulties. I always allow longer for a joint session, about eighty minutes works well, and it never ceases to move me to see how people who have lived together for years, in the space

of a short session can learn so much about each other that they never realised before.

Sally Phalan

The 14th International Focusing conference

By Pat Duffy

The Conference took place at the Asilomar Conference Grounds, Pacific Grove on the Monterey Peninsula, California from Monday 19th May to Friday 24th May 2002.

Asilomar is a complex of buildings situated minutes from the beach in a very beautiful part of the world. The weather was cold as forewarned with some rain the first few days, after that there was brilliant sunshine and it got gradually warmer as the week went on.

The Coordinators Meeting began on Sunday afternoon the 19th and ended on Monday before lunch. After a warm welcome by Mary, we began with an introductory Focusing session that was followed by a rich sharing by all present. Newcomers were then invited to pick a partner and share together on their Focusing projects etc.

Two important developments were presented during the meeting. One was, "FOCUSING FOR....." this is a new development from the Focusing Institute designed to locate, describe, and broadcast what we call Focusing "products". We are calling a "product" that which results when you combine some aspects of the Focusing process with something you are doing in a way that produces a *new and improved activity*. In order to help interested others learn how to do what you are doing, we want to hear how you describe your "product." Marilyn Frankfurt will be heading up the project and can be contacted at marilyn-fra@aol.com or 241 Central Park West, Suite ID, New York, NY 10025 (212) 595-9284.

The other was about THE FOCUSING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM. This program offers support for the Focusing community worldwide

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through the Institute website. It provides a way for Focusers to connect with each other internationally, have a choice of partners based on language, location, interests and more. It offers partnership coaching sessions to newcomers. It provides partnership assistance. For more information contact Lori Ketover at lori@focusing.org.

At one point in the meeting the group divided into two. Those who were interested in Focusing Oriented Therapy and those who were not in the therapy field. Out of the discussions that followed it was decided, as a way to promote Focusing, to have a press release drawn up that could be published locally in newspapers etc. with information about the Conference, the person locally who attended and details of forthcoming workshops. It could be adapted to local circumstances. It was decided that those interested in F.O.T. would continue their discussion at various times during the Conference. Some of the points raised were: To collect our therapy training materials and make them available, to create a major web area for F.O.T. (Minutes from the web)

Almost two hundred people attended the Conference from many parts of the world. The Conference opened on the Monday night with a Gala Introductory mixer. It was similar to the opening in Ireland last year but with a distinctly Californian flavour. It was a great way to get to know people and find your soul Mate and Home Group. The Home Group, including your Soul Mate, of approximately eight people met every day for Focusing depending on what people wanted, in partnerships or as a group or alone. The group Focusing provided an opportunity for the Focuser to receive empathic feedback from the group if so requested. This proved to be a very powerful and moving experience as well as providing a base within the larger Conference group.

There was a great variety of workshops on many aspects of Focusing and related topics. As it was impossible to attend all, choices had to be made on which ones to attend, but what made it easier was that audiotapes were made of some of them and are available from the Institute.

On the Wednesday night there was an experiment with whole group Focusing. Everybody was invited to Focus

at the same time and a microphone was available if anyone wanted to share. A highlight of the Conference for me was the Dances of Universal Peace led by Diane Budo. Diane taught us the various movements of the dances from the various cultures around the world. There was a real sense of these movements embodying what peace was all about. It was a wonderful experience. On Thursday night we had the Follies, the creativity, imagination and talent in the group was demonstrated in music, dance and a variety of sketches that were very entertaining. The Closing ceremony took place on the Friday morning and was hosted by Paul Huschilt, Paul entertained us with great energy and fun.

Unfortunately, Ann Weiser Cornell had to leave the Conference during the last days due to her mother having to undergo an operation on the East Coast. The prayers and good wishes of the Conference accompanied her. Since then Ann's mother has died, may she rest in peace, our prayers and thoughts are with Ann at this sad time.

The Conference was a wonderful opportunity to have met people from many and varied backgrounds yet having this powerful process that we know as Focusing in common. It was an experience that was very enjoyable as well as enlightening and one that has deepened for me my own process. Congratulations to Ann and her team for all the hard work both in the preparation and during the Conference itself.

*Pat Duffy
Belfast*

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