



Focusing in Ireland

AUTUMN 2005

ISSUE 20

International Conference in Canada

I attended the Focusing International held in Canada this year. It was an enjoyable experience, meeting people from all over the world who have a common interest in Focusing. The theme for the Conference this year was *Back to the Future* - how the future of focusing, based in its roots, will go forward in many different ways. As well as seminars, papers and workshops, a key aspect this year was on Interest Groups. These were unstructured groups where people could 'gather, collaborate and connect' on areas of interest to them. I attended the group on Gendlin's Process Model - a philosophical work which is interesting and challenging. It has deepened my understanding of focusing in many ways and it was interesting to hear what others thought. We met for two hours every morning so there was plenty of time for people to delve into different aspects of the work and what it meant to them. Adrian Farrelly, who also attended the Conference, convened an interest group on Christianity and Focusing. Other groups included Focusing and Buddhism, Focusing and Coaching, Focusing and Business.

I gave a workshop on Facilitative Focusing, or How to Work with Someone Else's Felt Sense, to give it its full - and very long - title. I was interested in how we can use focusing in everyday situations, like work for example. I had begun to notice that many people do 'focusing' quite naturally (it is after all a natural process) and that we can either help or hinder them in this natural process in how we respond to them in our interactions. All of this can be done without having to teach focusing

steps or mention 'focusing' at all. I suggested that if we use the skills we have learned in our focusing partnership - slowing down, reflecting back, giving people space - then they are more likely to be able to 'speak from' as Gendlin says, their felt sense. We can stop the natural process sometimes by rushing in too quickly. I tend to try and be too 'helpful', saying things like 'I know what you mean' or 'I feel like that too'. Now I try and pause, and give space to what is unclear to unfold on its own. By taking simple steps like this, a focusing way of living begins to emerge.



I attended Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin's workshop on *The Radical Acceptance of Everything*. They have developed ways of 'being with' or 'giving presence to' everything that comes, as they believe (and it's true!) that within every 'bad' feeling there is something that wants to be

set right. They have just published a book called *The Radical Acceptance of Everything* which is available from www.focusingresources.org or the Focusing Institute

One evening there was a special tribute dinner to Dr Mary McGuire who has retired from the Focusing Institute after many years. Mary was instrumental in setting up the training of trainers. She brought focusing to Ireland many years ago and Adrian Farrelly invited her and Janet Klein to give focusing retreats on Interactive Focusing in Tal-laght some years ago. I had the privilege at the Conference of thanking her for her work in Ireland and presented her with a small gift on behalf of the community here in Ireland.

I met with Mary Hendricks Gendlin when I was there and she told me about the project that the Focusing Institute is sponsoring in Afghanistan. Jerry Conway, a focusing trainer from England, is working with local Afghani aid workers, teaching them focusing and they are passing on what they have learned to others in this still dangerous country. I met Jerry at a focusing event some years ago and made contact with him in Kabul. He is keeping a diary of his work and it's really interesting to read how the project is going. Seemingly, there are over 2,500 trained focusers in Afghanistan already. Hope, surely for positive change in a war-torn country. Donations for the project welcomed by the Focusing Institute.

Next year's Conference will take place in Holland from Wednesday May 3rd - Sunday May 7th. Contact www.focusingonthemove.org

Mary Jennings

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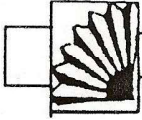
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Integrating Focusing into a Psychotherapy Practice and into Living

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

I am a qualified Child & Adolescent Psychotherapist working in private practice. Many parents come to me seeking help with or for their children. Despite my specific training, and although I do work with young children from time to time, the majority of my clients are now adults (individuals or couples), or adolescents. In the case of parents, I find Focusing to be doubly useful, as they develop new sensitivities to both their inner and outer 'children'!

In addition to my psychoanalytic training, I have, over the years, attended many courses to learn new approaches. For instance, I have studied among others, Family and Systemic Therapy, Jungian Sandplay Therapy and Brief Solution Focused Therapy. I have also trained as a Focusing Facilitator. I find Focusing a most useful tool with clients, both the technique itself and also the set of invaluable Focusing attitudes, and I endeavour to integrate Focusing into my practice.

For me, Focusing is essentially about self-empowerment and from the moment a new client walks in the door, what I have learnt through my Focusing training is present in the relationship. For example, I let them know at the beginning of our work together that I don't put myself in the 'expert' position because I can never know exactly what they need. Clearly *they* don't know either or they wouldn't be here, but I also tell them that I believe there *is* an expert in the room, a place inside of them that knows *exactly* what they need, and that I see my job as helping them to connect with that!

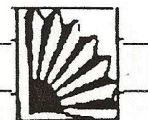
Also, from the beginning, I encourage my clients to always check out with their inner sense, their gut-feeling sense, if whatever I say feels right for *them*. I tell them that it doesn't matter if what I say is objectively right or true, if it isn't helpful to them *now*, then they can simply discard it. I have to say that bringing in a client's inner wisdom like this, and allowing *them* to take responsibility, rather than setting myself up to be something that I am not, takes a lot of the strain out of my work and gives me great freedom to offer clients whatever it is I feel I *have* to offer them.

I usually start to talk specifically about Focusing early on in my work with a new client. As a psychotherapist, rather than a Focusing facilitator, I work with clients in a number of different ways. Some take to Focusing easily and make good use of it, others use it less. I generally introduce it gradually, over a period of time. I will now describe some of the ways in which I have talked to my clients about Focusing. As a psychotherapist I do not like to talk too much! But clients seem to have found the ideas that follow useful in helping them to gradually understand more about Focusing and its associated attitudes. Of course in addition to talking about it, we also *do* it! Talking about Focusing really only makes sense when people have the opportunity to experience their Felt Sense. Once they have some experience of it, then, even when we are not Focusing as such, I often encourage clients, when they are talking, to keep bringing their attention down into the middle part of their bodies and to listen to what is happening there.

When I begin to explain Focusing, I refer to it as a natural skill, something they will all have been able to do as young children. For example, if children are sad, they

naturally cry, if they are angry, they scream or kick, etc. In other words, how they feel is how they express themselves - simply! However, usually quite early on, children learn that for various reasons it is *not* ok to simply express what they feel! They learn this in a number of ways, usually connected with their parents. For example, they learn from *watching* their parents. They see that their parents, who apparently know so much more than they do, and who are so important to them, frequently deny or distort their feelings. Children are very perceptive so they usually know quite well if a parent is sad or angry! Inevitably they will model themselves on their parents, and so they become confused and lose confidence in the integrity of their own feelings. Also, particularly in regard to anger, children quickly learn that 'acting out' is not acceptable, provoking punishment or, at the least, disapproval. The problem is that young children can't distinguish between what they *feel* and how they *act* - they therefore assume not just that it is 'bad' to throw a temper tantrum, but more seriously, that it is bad to even *feel* angry! At this point they may begin to suppress and cut off from their feelings. In relation to children's moments of distress, such as fear, anxiety or sadness, very few parents can simply remain present, without trying to fix it for them. To see their children hurting stirs up the parent's own unintegrated pain and they quickly move in to 'talk it away'. But children, who, unlike adults, are much more keyed in at the *heart* than at the *head* level, simply pick up on their parents discomfort and begin to be afraid of their feelings themselves.

If there is no understanding adult available to simply hold them emotionally, then children will very easily feel overwhelmed. Our strong emotions are very pow-



erful! Even as adults we can find it hard to contain them - imagine then a tiny two year old trying to handle a temper tantrum, or being exposed to the terror of overhearing his parents arguing! In order to simply survive, in this kind of situation, young children really *have* to cut off from their feelings!

But these suppressed feelings do not simply go away. Here I talk to my clients about what wonderful creatures we are in that we have built-in systems for self-healing. They already know this at the physical level - cut your skin and, if you just keep it clean, it will heal perfectly from within. They may not realise that our psyches are also set-up to self-heal! However because of the dual nature of conscious and unconscious mind it is a bit more complex. Firstly, whatever we are unable to process at the time is stored in our unconscious mind, then, when our own deeper wisdom decides we are ready, it begins to surface these old wounds in order to bring them to the attention of our conscious mind. It is when our conscious and unconscious minds join together, which is what happens when we Focus, that these old traumas heal and reintegrate naturally.

While most adults have forgotten how to focus, there is one area in which many, if not all of us, have retained the ability. I explain it like this: - I ask my client to see if he or she can relate to an experience that I have myself from time to time. For example, I get a 'feeling', a sense that I have forgotten something and I find myself saying to myself - 'Oh, there's something I need to remember, what can it be?' Then I begin to run ideas through my head, listening inside and suddenly it comes to me - 'Oh, yes! I was supposed to ring so and so!'

Most people relate to this example easily. In fact, in all my years of practice I only *once* encountered a

client who could not, and, interestingly, I was never able to teach her Focusing!

From the example above I am able to pull out a lot of the elements of Focusing. For example, it demonstrates that we have *two* centres of knowing - not just the one in the head (because I *had* forgotten at that level), but also another, an even deeper, body-based centre, situated down in the gut. This deeper centre sent me a message that I *immediately* knew was helpful so that I wanted to attend to it. I listened, I allowed my conscious, rational mind to present me with ideas and I resonated those ideas with the inner feeling until "Bingo!" Once I hit the right idea something shifted in a felt way, I just *knew*, with no doubt, that that was what my gut, or deeper unconscious mind, had been trying to tell me!

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I try to generalise from this example by explaining that, in fact, *everything* that comes from inside is trying to help us and needs us to receive it! That because we have cut off from our feelings, we have become afraid of them. Feelings of fear, pain, anxiety etc. arise and we will do *anything* to avoid them. We turn on the TV, or take a drink, or work too hard, or use drugs or medication, etc. This is the basis of addiction and our society is rife with it! I explain that these uncomfortable feelings are just parts

of us that need love - they are like neglected children, they simply need to be welcomed in and listened to and then they calm down. I often quote Eugene Gendlin where he said to a client, who was afraid to look inside, something like "If it's inside of you then you are suffering from it anyway, and at least if you know what it is you may be able to do something about it."

My aim is to teach my clients not only to Focus with me in their sessions, but also to begin to *listen* to themselves, in a body-based way, in their day-to-day living. I encourage them to cultivate two attitudes in particular, as they begin to turn inside and become more familiar with their inner world. These attitudes are curiosity and compassion. They often find it difficult initially to 'welcome' feelings that they experience as 'bad' or 'dark', feelings such as emptiness, anger, loneliness, anxiety etc. But when they simply stay with their experience, and hold it gently, they are often surprised by how it shifts. They can gradually begin to feel more at home inside of themselves, more peaceful.

So over the weeks or months that we work together, I try to help them develop a number of what I call skills for living. For example, I encourage them to practice self-observation, the ability to step back a little and begin to disidentify. I ask them to watch their language - for example, rather than saying 'I am very angry!' they can say (recognising the truth in it), 'A part of me is very angry!' And then they are in the position to begin to make a relationship with that part. Thus their healing process can unfold as they learn to avoid the pitfalls of either becoming overwhelmed, or of going into cut-off mode as challenging situations arise or emotions surface. In this way, Focusing can extend beyond the therapy session and become a part of daily living!