

## Experiment 5: Helping conversational partners use felt sensing microprocesses

### Background

*On felt sensing in everyday life:*

“Thinking is the process of successively ‘selecting’ symbols for present felt meaning, finding that the symbols ‘call forth’ more felt meaning than one anticipated, then ‘selecting’ more symbols for some of this excess. This excess can be specified in multiple ways.” (Gendlin, *ECM*, p.162)

“Notice that, depending upon what you need, you can focus on a very general, broad aspect of experiencing, such as feeling joyful or tense, or you may focus on a very, very specific and finely determined aspect, such as, ‘What is the law of supply and demand?’ Either way, you refer to an experiential felt sense, and either way you have something concrete and definitely present to you, though its meaning may be vague.” (Gendlin, *ECM*, p.14)

*On felt sensing in psychotherapy:*

“The therapist’s aim is not the client’s direct sensing of just any kind of feeling, especially not a familiar feeling. The aim is rather to invite the client to attend to what is directly sensed but is more global and unclear than the usual—something at the zone between conscious and unconscious.” (Gendlin, *FOP*, loc. 1013-1016)

“For many people it takes quite some time to learn how to *let* something as odd as a felt sense come in. It is hard to know how to dispose one’s attention so that a felt sense may come. It is rather like attending to something that is not even there yet. It is not an obvious mode of attention at all. [...] Focusing is a systematic, knowing way to let something implicit open.” (Gendlin, *FOP*, loc. 982-989)

“most people can learn [Focusing] quite naturally as it is described here, with very small short bits of instruction” (Gendlin, *FOP*, loc.967-968)

Some points to ponder:

- how pervasive experiencing felt meaning is;
- the range of ‘focusing’ processes, from commonplace, easy and familiar, to challenging and (relatively) unusual;
- the accessibility of felt sensing skills;
- what differentiates the usual from the (relatively) unusual felt sensing processes; and
- what these quotations reveal, or imply, about the play of felt sensing in conversation.

### Research questions, interests

What shifts in ‘experiential depth’ (use of felt sensing) are occurring in passages of conversation? - shifts towards and away from more holistic, more novel, more unclear-oriented felt sensing.

In non-therapeutic conversations, how can we help conversational partners with felt sensing?

### Methods

Exploring ways to help conversational partners, and yourself, make more use of felt sensing skills in conversations depends on two related skills:

1. noticing shifts in ‘experiential depth’ in your processes, and
2. finding ways (micropractices, nanopractices) to help them, and yourself, draw more richly on felt sensing, when it feels like this will be helpful.

The first skill is a platform for the second. For example, (i) a person might be hesitating as they are trying to articulate something, which *may* involve them checking with their ‘feel’ for what they want to say and being unclear about what in particular would be right, and, noticing that, (ii) you can look for ways to give them more space in the conversation, encouraging them to take their time to work out just what they actually want to say.



This reflective practice experiment is:

**In conversations, noticing how 'experiential depth' is shifting, and exploring opportunities to help people make more skillful use of their felt sensing skills.**

Throughout this work, let kindness, gentleness infuse and underly what you do. If you feel a soft 'no' to something you are doing or are about to do, pause, back up, and freshly consider what is actually forward for you now ...

### *Noticing shifts in experiential depth*

To have felt meaning in play when we are thinking, speaking and listening is ordinary: we are all doing this all the time. There are important differences in *how* we do this, however, that the Experiencing Scale developed by Gendlin and colleagues points to.

Low Level Experiencing (EXP) processes have the following characteristics:

1. Use of past tense.
2. Reporting of external events.
3. Events or emotions are described as flat and self-evident.

Middle Level Experiencing (EXP) has the following characteristics:

1. Mainly a descriptive narrative of events.
2. Personally felt meanings are referred to, but briefly, without internal elaboration.

In a High Experiencing (EXP) process, the [person] has specific, observable characteristics:

1. An inner exploration of personally felt meanings is the main focus. Events are referred to only as a base from which to sense inwardly into one's whole body sense of a situation.
2. Present tense is being used.
3. There are pauses as one waits to let words or images come from the felt sense.
4. One uses language metaphorically: "The feeling is like. . ."
5. One uses language to point to the implicit: "it," "that," "something," what is sensed but not yet known.

Source: Hendricks, M., N. (1986). 'Experiencing level as a therapeutic variable', *Person-Centered Review*, Vol. 1 No. 2, 141-162. (With minor editing.)

Tracking shifts in experiential depth in our own process is particularly useful, because when we reduce our use of felt sensing we reduce our opportunities for responding astutely and appropriately. (That can be appropriate of course; the wider point is that it is helpful to be aware of the choices we are making.)

It is also useful to be tracking the shifts (so far as we can read them) of our conversational partners, as awareness of those shifts helps us with helping them listen more astutely to themselves. We may notice, for instance, that someone starts to pay attention to something unclear, but gets anxious about the time they are taking and lets deeper (= more holistic, more unclear-oriented) felt sensing go, and returns to articulating the familiar. At points like that, we can encourage them to go back and take more time.

The term 'experiential depth' derives from the 'Experiencing Scale', a rating scale developed by Gendlin and colleagues for measuring how prominent felt sensing was in a therapy client's process. Mary Hendricks' 'Focusing Proficiency Scale' (developed for the Focusing Institute's certification processes), and derived in part from the 'Experiencing Scale', is a more useful reference for looking at shifts in felt sensing in conversation, however. We are providing that as background information, for those who feel like exploring this in more depth.



## *Ways of helping conversational partners to listen to themselves more deeply*

Our platform for this is Gendlin's guidance on how to teach Focusing in very small steps in psychotherapeutic conversation. In principle, we can teach people Focusing in conversations in many settings, time permitting. More generally, we can help many conversational partners make better use of their capacities for felt sensing, simply to help with the task at hand.

The small practices Gendlin uses come directly from his way of teaching Focusing in classes. In class these skills are part of his teaching practice and a curriculum. In a psychotherapeutic conversation, he brings them in where it looks like they may be relevant and helpful. They are described in detail in chapter 5 of his book *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy*, and, with a different frame, in his book *Focusing*. We are also providing a background document on these skills, which you can draw on for additional information about these practices.

The practices Gendlin uses are as follows:

- 1. Listening for and checking/reflecting each nuance**
- 2. Responding so as to evoke an unclear 'something'**
- 3. Helping to find a handle**
- 4. Helping people to sense whether a handle or image resonates**
- 5. Explicitly inviting a person to let a felt sense come**
- 6. Providing instructions to 'tap it lightly, sense it, be with it, stay next to it'**
- 7. Being friendly towards a felt sense, and receiving in friendly way**

When seeking to help people you are in conversation with use felt sensing helpfully, be sensitive to both your own process and theirs, and if you find a place where you would like to help,

- wait to see if something that seems helpful comes;
- and if it does, say it tentatively, in a way that makes it easy for the person to *not* follow your lead;
- and if it doesn't, relax into appreciating that it seemed like a suggestion might be helpful, but nothing came that actually felt like it fitted the situation.

What Gendlin emphasizes re therapeutic conversation applies generally:

*"The manner of the ongoing interaction is always more important than any other consideration such as whether focusing is occurring or not."* (FOP, loc.958)

For a mutually helpful conversation, it is much more important to stay aligned than it is for the person to be welcoming your cues to use Focusing microprocesses. He remarks:

"At [this point] the therapist can feel clearly that *he* wants her to focus, and that this has been a slight disjunction between them. By "disjunction" I mean the familiar feeling that one person is trying to get the other to do something that the other person does not want to do, but both people pretend not to notice this and continue in a friendly fashion." (FOP, loc.958)

If you notice that what you are hinting at or inviting is not welcome, step back and give the person the space to follow the kind of experiential process *they* feel most comfortable with.

For our experiment, simply focus on learning. Welcome whatever comes, and see what you can learn from it.



## *Experiencing level & supporting felt sensing in conversation - reflective practice experiment*

In this exercise we will be exploring (i) shifts in 'experiential depth' (a term linked to the 'Experiential Scale' and delineation of 'Focusing Proficiencies', both of which stem from Gendlin's work) in conversations, and (ii) opportunities for supporting participants making richer use of their capacities for felt sensing, as they are conversing.

### Set up:

- Groups of 4 to 5 people
- 2 in conversation, 2 observing
  - if there are 5 people, the 5th can either observe or participate
- Topic to be one of:
  - What in your life are you passionate about?
  - What has Focusing brought to your life that you didn't have before?
  - What do you find most interesting about conversation?

### Process:

- **Plan:** Decide who will participate in the conversation, and who will observe it. Decide who will time keep (25 minutes for the whole process)
- **Conversation:** Volunteers having about 7 minutes of conversation in which

#### **participants**

- talk together about one of the identified topics
- seek to notice shifts in 'experiential depth', uses of felt sensing (their own & others')
- use felt sensing more self-consciously when it occurs to them that this could be helpful
- look for opportunities to help conversational partners to go deeper (making more skillful use of felt sensing) when you think this might be helpful

#### **observers**

- look for shifts in 'experiential depth', uses of felt sensing
  - look at ways people are, or might, help each other to make wiser use of felt sensing
- **Reflecting:** Reflect together for about 18 minutes, discussing shifts in experiential depth, traces of felt sensing being used, any steps taken to help the other person with felt sensing, or any possibilities for that, and anything else about the play of felt sensing in the conversation that seems interesting.
  - If time permitted, you could swap over and the observers could become conversing participants. That will only be possible if the reflecting, and perhaps the conversation, are shorter than we envisaged here. (Simply make the best use of your time for learning.)

### **Ongoing experimentation**

When it feels easy, welcome, joyful, or interesting, (and only then: not when this feels uncomfortable or unwelcome), during the coming week,

noticing how our own process is shifting, making now more, now less, use of felt sensing to understand,

noticing how our others' processes are shifting, making now more, now less, use of felt sensing to understand,

exploring, in small, very gentle ways, whether the people we are talking to welcome cues to listen to themselves more deeply, by making more use of felt sensing.

Let kindness, gentleness infuse and underly what you do. If you feel a soft 'no' to something you are doing or are about to do, pause, back up, and freshly consider what is actually forward for you here ..

