

Edited Extracts from **the Prologue** and **How Adults Focus**

Before you read this book, you need to be somewhat acquainted with Focusing, and that is the subject of this chapter. "Focusing is a body-oriented process of self-awareness and emotional healing [and growth]," says Ann Weiser Cornell in her book *The Power of Focusing* (1996). "Focusing is a step-by-step process of paying attention to a bodily sense of a situation, problem or creative project," says the Focusing Institute in one of their introductory brochures.

In the last chapter of this book, called *How Adults Focus*, you can read about each step of the Focusing process. These same steps are also described in Chapter Three, *Teaching Focusing to the Individual Child*, because Focusing is taught in a similar way for all ages. Prior to learning the steps, however, it is essential for the reader to understand the term "felt sense," which can be defined as "the subtle level of knowing that speaks to you through your body" (Cornell, 1996).

#### **YOUR BODY'S WISDOM**

What does it feel like inside of you? What do you notice inside yourself? If you want to get a picture of what is underneath a child's thinking and emotions, you need the ability to access emotions and experiences inside yourself. Then you can help children discover for themselves what is underneath. If you want to give attention to a child in a caring and open manner, you must learn to be open and caring about your own inner experience.

*Imagine the following: You want to borrow an egg or a cup of sugar. You are standing in front of a neighbor's door. Get a sense of the situation in your body. Now imagine standing in front of a different neighbor's door. What does that feel like in your body? Are you standing differently? Feeling differently inside? All you are doing both times is asking to borrow something. But somewhere inside you is a complex knowing that changes the experience.*

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Your body can sense a number of subtle distinctions that you might not put into words, yet your body knows them to be quite different. We call this the "felt sense" of a situation.

Frequently we are influenced by our felt senses, those subtle things that the brain does not name. Our body contains a more complex level of knowing than what is purely logical. Our felt sense can tell us a lot, but often we have forgotten how to trust it. In our society there is little encouragement for paying attention to our bodily-felt experiences. So we learn to ignore our body's signals and act solely on what our mind indicates is right or wrong.

Yet in sports we pay attention to our body's signals. We listen to the pounding of our heart after a 50-yard dash. We take it into account when considering whether to run another 50 yards. We pay attention when we are out of breath or our muscles are aching.

We also listen to our body when we eat. A hunger signal incites us to eat more. A full feeling tells us we've had enough. We listen to our body when we are sick, and we try to tell the doctor what is bothering us.

Then there are situations when our bodies tell us something of a different order, on a less conscious plane, such as when we are trying to remember someone's name. We say that the name is "right on the tip of our tongue." This can be an uncomfortable feeling. Once we remember it, the discomfort vanishes and we feel physical relief.

Numerous common expressions point to this relationship between our everyday experience and a feeling in our body. "It's breaking my heart." "I lost my head." "It turns my stomach." "He had a gut feeling," etc.

Often however the felt sense is vague. It's just an unclear feeling that there is something there. It turns out that by focusing our attention on this "something," it can become more distinct. We even find that this "something" carries meaning, even unexpected meaning.

We cannot control these inner sensations. Even when we'd rather not hear what our body has to say, it keeps sending us signals. If something is bothering us, it doesn't work to tell ourselves that there's no problem. Quite the contrary, that "something" remains present. By giving it a friendly sort of attention, this "something" can slowly become clearer and reveal some meaning. We do not have control over whether or not the feeling is present, but we can control whether or not we give it friendly attention.

*Joseph is tormented by fear of getting cancer. Every morning he wakes up afraid he has a tumor. His friends and family try to ease his worries. The doctor assures him that, medically speaking, nothing is wrong. Joseph's wife can't understand his fear. Why should he be so anxious when there's no reason for it? She asks a therapist how they can get rid of Joseph's fear. She is dismayed when the therapist replies that the goal is not to take away Joseph's fear. While he is saying this, Joseph's relief is noticeable. The therapist says his aim is to make Joseph's fear concrete and to work with it. He uses Focusing to help Joseph stand still and experience his fear. Deeper than the fear of cancer, he discovers, is his inability to reduce his workload and make more time for his family. Joseph loves spending time with his wife and children, but as the primary breadwinner, his job is to earn the money to sustain the family. This makes him anxious. Just acknowledging this brings him physical relief.*

**Reflection:**

*Joseph's fear doesn't need to be suppressed. In fact, once he allows the fear to be present, he can look at what's underneath it.*

*By staying with the fear and listening to it, Joseph opens the door to change. Now he has a little more space inside and more energy for living his life.*

What is a "felt sense"? It is:

- palpable in the body
- not purely physical
- more than what you can put into words
- meaningful
- sometimes vague, almost imperceptible

**INNER MEANING**

At the heart of Focusing is understanding that the "felt sense" of a situation carries meaning. Every situation, whether past or present, positive or negative, can give you a felt sense in your body. Usually this sense is found in your core — in the torso, that is, the stomach and chest — but it can also be felt in the throat, shoulders, or any part of the body.

Look inside you right now. If you notice a felt sense right away, ask yourself what situation in your life it might be connected to. Alternatively, you can choose a situation in your life and invite a felt sense to form around it.

*One afternoon, Marta presents an introductory Focusing workshop to teachers and staff at an elementary school. When she enters the building at 4 pm she notices a lot of commotion. The night before, the school was broken into and considerable damage was done. All day, the teachers have been busy with their students. This is the first chance they have to consider how the burglary has affected them personally.*

*Marta invites the participants in her workshop to check inside for how Focusing could help. One teacher remarks that she's been feeling strange and grumpy all day and that the feeling interfered with her teaching. "It's as if I was in another world. Though the children needed me badly in all this chaos, I understood nothing of myself."*

*Marta invites the teacher to check inside and notice whether her physical experience carries meaning, whether her grumpiness wants to tell a story. The teacher takes up the invitation and turns her attention inward. First she notices a feeling in her stomach. The teacher stays with it, giving it her caring attention: "... A mess ... No, chaos ... Chaos, that is the right word ... Voices are calling ... " She sees an image of a burning house and herself being carried from it. She feels her father carrying her. She sees horrible images. She hears voices and the roar of the fire. "... It is terrible ... I can still feel his strong arms ... I am safe ... " She sighs deeply: "... Now I can finally talk about it."*

**Reflection:**

*This teacher's confusion as a child was never really heard. And even now that she's an adult, all day at school her old feelings had been rumbling in her stomach, distracting her. After Focusing she tells the group that no one in her family discussed that terrifying fire after it took place. She reflects, "Often I have a heavy feeling in my stomach without understanding why it's there. Now it feels so spacious inside, as if there's a hall there and I can dance in it."*

Focusing is a skill that stimulates more awareness of yourself. It is a gentle way of relating to your own inner knowing. Focusing teaches you to trust the wisdom you carry inside. It teaches you to listen to your inner experience while it is whispering, before it has to start shouting.

## INNER DIALOGUE

In addition, Focusing enables you not only to listen to your experience, but to enter into a dialogue with it. By communicating with your inner knowing you allow for the possibility of change, the kind of change that is affirmed by an inner good feeling.

Focusing is not the same as venting your emotions. Our inner physically held experience contains a lot more than pure emotion. The felt sense may have an emotional quality, but there is more.

For instance, you may plan to have a calm conversation with your supervisor at work. But once you're in the room with him, you find yourself shutting down, forgetting everything you planned to say, or even yelling. This is not how you planned it. Afterwards, if you pay attention to what was taking place in your body, you may understand your reaction to the conversation, the meaning behind your behavior, and this understanding may give you a sense of what you can do differently next time.

Dealing with your inner knowing requires some daring. It is an adventure to be present with something that is as yet beyond words. Remember that Focusing is an innate skill but most adults have lost touch with it. It takes time to develop a good working relationship with your private self. It takes some searching and some practice to create a safe atmosphere inside, and to open yourself completely to what comes up. The good news is that the more you practice it, the more natural it will feel. It can be a pleasure to discover how simple and straightforward Focusing is.

*Erik still remembers his first Focusing workshop. He was very tense because he very much wanted to do well and to learn a lot. Then the instructor said: "With Focusing, everything is possible. Nothing is a must. Your body will know where it wants to go." As Erik let these words sink in, he felt a sense of relief.*

You don't have to think. No analysis is expected. Of course, this is not to say that thinking has no place in Focusing. On the contrary, the felt sense is expressed through words, stories, sentences, or drawings. To create these symbols you use your cognition. However Focusing begins from a state of not knowing what will happen next. With this lack of knowing comes a certain vulnerability. It is therefore

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very important that you feel safe and learn to trust the inner process. When we say that your inner knowing communicates by means of symbols, we mean that a certain word, image, or gesture will feel like the right way to express your felt sense. Finding the right symbol allows your process to reveal its meaning. Your inner knowing has a fuller, more intricate story to tell than you could ever think up.

*Aurelie, a young woman of thirty, is attending a one-on-one Focusing session. She is searching for the words to describe her feelings toward her mother: "Open, really ... Yet not the same openness as with everyone ... it is special ... my mother ... sometimes she disappoints me ... " As Aurelie says this, she digs her nails deeply into her hand. As she makes contact with a felt sense, she finds something that she can't quite capture in language; her mother hurts her. Through Focusing she is able to link this gesture with her hands to a felt sense about her mother; the gesture symbolized it.*

Fortunately, the body lets us know whether or not our symbols are correct. A correct symbol, or articulation, brings relief, while an incorrect one leaves us uneasy, with a sense that more could be expressed. A proper articulation of the felt sense brings an inner shift, a feeling of relief or peace and an end to any wrenching or pushing inside.

You can use Focusing whenever you need it. When you feel overwhelmed by emotions, Focusing ensures that you do not stay with their intensity. You can listen to the story of these emotions without drowning in them. Focusing can also clarify decision-making, taking you to a deeper level than you can reach by weighing options rationally or emotionally. If you are stuck in behavioral patterns, you can use Focusing to listen to the part of yourself that is responsible for those patterns. People who suffer from a lot of self-criticism can free themselves through Focusing. By Focusing you learn to accept yourself with all your limitations and possibilities.

In a wonderful variety of ways, Focusing supports you both in your inner life and in your contact with others.

## How Adults Focus

This chapter outlines the Focusing process for adults. Focusing can be defined as paying attention to a bodily sense of some aspect of your experience, which is often felt only vaguely at first but can also be a strong, overwhelming sensation. By sitting patiently and respectfully with what you are feeling inside, you can learn what your *felt sense* has to say. This inner "something" begins to move, and brings about change in small steps.

Remember that is this process the body knows which direction to take. If you follow the sentences below, you can experience this for yourself.

*Take the time to let your attention go inside.*

*Do you know the feeling you have in your body when something is done ... when you've taken care of something you needed to do?*

*Do you remember the relief you felt when you made it somewhere just in time?*

*In these moments something reacts inside. You can feel it clearly. It's as though something shifts or expands, becoming lighter.*

*Take a moment to recall what it's like to find something you thought you lost. Or the feeling of discovering that something difficult in your life will be resolved.*

*Do you notice a shift?*

This is called the *felt shift*. It is a physically experienced change. With this shift you feel a sense of rightness and an easement in the body.

### OUTLINE OF THE STEPS

In order to teach Focusing to others, Dr. Eugene Gendlin initially divided the process into six steps. In actual fact, each time you use the process, it will be unique. Sometimes you'll move through a step quickly; other times a certain step will demand a lot of attention. Not

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all the steps will be followed every time. These steps form the basic structure, but it is a very flexible structure.

Four steps form the core of the Focusing process. They are: *discovering a felt sense, finding a handle, resonating, and receiving*. Two more steps, *asking and exploring* and *clearing a space*, allow you to deepen the process. They also help move things along when you get stuck.

Of course, as a pre-step, you need to let your attention go inside. An outline of the Focusing process might look like this:

- Letting your attention go inside
- The core steps
  - Discovering a felt sense
  - Finding a handle
  - Resonating
  - Receiving
- Further steps that support the process
  - Asking/exploring
  - Clearing a space

#### Letting your attention go inside

Letting your attention go inside requires some preparation. If you are going to pay attention to your inner experience, you need to make a time and space for it. Choose a place where you feel safe and comfortable. No special posture is necessary. Let your body know it will be there for a while. You may want to close your eyes.

There are different ways of letting the attention go inside. If you can already do it, feel free to use your own method. Note, however, that in Focusing, attention does not remain in the mind, as in a strictly thinking process. Neither does it go as deep as in a meditative process. It remains somewhere in between.

You can use the following text to guide your attention inward:

*Feel your feet making contact with the floor ...*

*Feel how your body makes contact with the chair, the back of the chair and the seat ...*

*Feel how your head is connected to your torso ...*

*Listen to your breathing without changing anything about it ...*

*Feel the movement of your breath ...*

*With every exhalation, allow your attention to travel deeper inside ...*

*Let your attention sink down to the middle area of your body, the place where you feel your own depth ...*

*Be sure to be aware of the torso, chest and stomach area ...*

*Once you have arrived there, create an atmosphere that is warm*

*and mild, open and receptive to anything that may come ...*

Take the time now to read through this text once more. Stop after each sentence and either close your eyes or find something neutral to look at. Don't proceed to the next sentence until you feel in your body that a connection has been made.

#### The core steps

Read the paragraphs below and digest the sentences in italics one by one. Take time with this experience. Trust your body. Allow yourself to wait and see what comes.

#### Discovering your felt sense

Once you have turned your attention inward, ask yourself: *What wants my attention now?* Wait respectfully and see what comes. Allow your body, not your mind, to answer the question. It can be amazing to realize that the body knows what needs to be heard. It might be a problem, a question you're wondering about, or an event you are anticipating. The situations that occupy your mind are linked to the body.

*Keeping your attention inside yourself, take time to imagine the situation you want to focus on. Really imagine yourself in this situation. Notice when you begin to feel something in your body.*

*Usually the felt sense comes up in the part of your body where you breathe — somewhere between your throat and your pelvis. Be friendly and patient even if it is vague or unclear. Stay with it, giving it your attention. Allow it to unfold in its own way.*

*Ask yourself if there is a word to describe how it feels. Is it itchy ... chilly ... like an iron bar ... like a fist ... like a chick ... like a balloon? Searching for this word will deepen your connection to the felt sense. No matter what comes, take it seriously ... even when nothing comes.*

Staying in touch with a felt sense is the essence of Focusing. If you lose contact, go back to it. Stay with the felt sense until you notice even a small change inside.

#### Finding a handle

Let the felt sense tell you how it wants to be described. Don't force it. Let the symbolizing of it — a word, gesture, sound, or image— come from the felt sense itself. When you find one of these symbols

that matches the felt sense, you'll notice a feeling of relief and a shift inside. Now the often surprising moment occurs, when something new comes out.

*Wait until a word ... image ... movement ... color ... or smell emerges ...*

*Take time here, remaining open to everything that comes.*

*If you notice something, stay with it ... say hello to it ... give it some friendly attention, even if it is fear or another difficult physical sensation.*

*Allow what's inside to begin its own story.*

*Check and see how this "something" inside responds to your attention.*

By saying "hello" to something, you accept that it is the way it is for the moment. This is a precious moment in the process. It is the start of communication with your inner experience. Sometimes you may not like what you encounter inside. Even then, take a patient attitude and give it a greeting in recognition. Allow your body to tell you what it wants you to know.

#### Resonating

Resonating is the process of checking whether the handle — the word, the image, or other symbol of the felt sense — matches what you feel inside your body. If it does match, it will be like a handle, allowing you to "catch hold" of the felt sense and maintain it in your awareness. This is a step you can apply again and again. Whenever you find a way of expressing or symbolizing the felt sense, check it against what you feel inside.

*Do these words fit with what you are experiencing?*

*Go back and forth with your attention, moving between the felt sense and the word, image, or gesture that has come to describe it.*

*If the description fits, your body will confirm it. When you get a feeling of agreement, when the symbol fits your inner experience exactly, you will feel this in your body. You'll notice that your breathing deepens. Or you may feel a slight tremor. You'll feel as though something has been freed up. Stay with that.*

Sometimes your body lets you know that the handle is right, but that there is something more to be expressed. For example, if the word "suffocating" were to come up, you would ask yourself whether

"suffocating" captured your felt sense in its entirety. You might find that another word seems to belong with it. Maybe there's "sadness" there as well. Once again, you ask the felt sense whether "suffocating" and "sad" capture the whole of it. Maybe now your body lets you know that the word "suffocating" still isn't quite right. Then the word "stranglehold" comes up and your whole body suddenly says: "Yes, that is it. 'Like a stranglehold'. That fits much better than 'suffocating'." By resonating the word with the felt sense, you test it out. Maybe a word like 'restless' comes even closer to your inner experience. Again you test that out, offering it to the felt sense. If you feel any change inside, stay with it.

In summary, resonating is the continuous interaction between your inner experience and the symbol that has come up for it.

### **Receiving**

Throughout the Focusing process, there are moments when something new comes. These may be big steps or small changes. It furthers the process if you welcome each step, however small. This is what we mean by receiving.

When it is time to end, spend a few minutes doing this.

*Ask inside whether now would be a good moment to end.*

*Check inside whether it has had enough or whether you should focus on this topic again some time in the future.*

It's important to receive and confirm what came, especially anything new, to let it take root. Your problem may not be completely solved, but go ahead and recognize the steps you did take. Recognize that you now know where the issue lives in your body and that you know where to meet up with it again. A step has been made and there will be more steps in the future.

There are a few different ways to end a Focusing process. It depends in part on what your body needs in that moment.

*Ask your inner self if now would be a good time to end.*

*Take the time to review your Focusing process, recalling where you started, paying particular attention to anything that was new.*

*How does it feel in your body now?*

*Anchor that new feeling in the body so that you can hold on to it ...*

*Maybe there's something that you want to get back to later ...*

*Maybe there's a spot where you can keep this feeling so you can return to it when the time is right.*

*If you want to, end with a thank you. Thank your body for what you've been given. Let it know that you're grateful for it.*

### **Two further steps**

In addition to these core steps are another two that Dr. Gendlin describes. These are: *asking/exploring* and *clearing a space*.

### **Asking/exploring**

Sometimes you find a very stable handle and no further meaning emerges. It can be enough that you have found a word that is a good representation of your inner experience. Just naming it can bring a sense of relief. If "stranglehold" was your handle and you resonated with it and it remained "stranglehold," that would mean that your body was satisfied with this name. Still, you might want to discover more about the felt sense that "stranglehold" represents. Asking a question of that inside place can be helpful when your process seems to stall. Asking questions helps you explore the process.

Asking and exploring take time. In other areas of our lives, the emphasis is to find an answer as quickly as possible. In Focusing, the emphasis is on patience and respect. Answers come only when you listen patiently, with your attention focused on what's inside. Having found a word or image that matches the felt sense, you are going to communicate with your inner self, by using questions to move things along.

The starting point for asking a question is *not knowing*. You are open to new discoveries, ready to be amazed and appreciative of any "answer" that comes. Your attitude toward your inner experience is one of respect and friendliness. Remember, this is not like posing a question to your mind; the mind and the body know different things and answer questions in different ways.

The questions below can be used to further your inner communication. You needn't ask all of them. Just choose those that might clarify your inner process. Note that these are process questions. Content questions, which ask what happened and where and why, are part of the thinking process, while process questions, which explore the "how" of a situation, are better suited for Focusing. They carry your internal journey forward.

*What is so "sad"? (Insert your handle here in place of "sad.")*

Your objective is to link your inner experience to specific situations in your life. What situation in your life makes this "sadness" come up?

*What is this all about?*

Again, you are searching for a connection between the "sad" feeling

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and feeling fine inside. You can put this "a lot" outside your body, by placing each obstacle one by one in an imaginary safe place. This is called "clearing a space." It frees up room inside and enables you to concentrate better. It also gives you more energy and deepens your connection to who you really are. There is one caveat, however. You must promise yourself that you will deal with these problems later on.

There are a number of questions you can use to prompt "clearing a space":

*Is there anything in me that is demanding attention at this moment?*

*Is there anything in my life that is making me feel less than fine?*

*Is there a place in my body that is keeping me from feeling good?*

*If I say to myself: "Everything is perfect," do I then feel in my*

*body that this is so? Or is there a place inside that knows*

*otherwise?*

Go to each felt sense. Give it some attention. Don't go into it too deeply. But notice it. Stay with it. Find a handle for it. Then take this bodily feeling with its handle and place it outside yourself. Picture yourself putting it in a bucket or box or up on a shelf, whatever feels right to you. Next, repeat the whole process. Ask yourself what else is demanding your attention. Give that some time and interest and then place it outside of you, such as on a cloud, or behind a door. Do this until you start to feel clear. That may happen after one or two cycles. Or it may take five cycles. Trust that a good feeling will come. When it does, take time to enjoy the feeling of clear space inside.

When you start Focusing you may know exactly what situation you want to focus on. In that case, by all means go to that issue and the felt sense in your body that goes with it. However, if you feel full of all different events, problems, and experiences, you may want to clear a space first. Once you've given time and attention to the many things clamoring inside, you can check to see which one needs re-examining. Some questions you can ask at that point are:

*Which one feels the heaviest?*

*Which one hurts most?*

*What affects me the most?*

*What bothers me the most?*

*What is demanding my attention most?*

In daily life, clearing a space can be used as an independent micro-process. In this case the goal is not to go deeply into any one feeling, but to free up space for other tasks. Clearing a space is great for reducing stress. You might clear a space before starting work. In cases of physical illness, clearing a space can be an essential healing step.