

Psychotherapy Guidebook

EXPERIENTIAL

FOCUSING &

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Eugene T. Gendlin

Experiential Focusing and Psychotherapy

Eugene T. Gendlin

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 2012 by Richie Herink and Paul Richard Herink

Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Experiential Focusing and Psychotherapy

Eugene T. Gendlin

DEFINITION

Experiential Focusing is a method of attending inwardly to let a “felt sense” form. This is a holistic sense of a problem or unresolved situation. It forms if one attends to how the body feels from inside. At first there may be a blank or some vague tension or ease, but in less than a minute one can feel a whole sense of the problem forming there. This felt sense is not just physical as with muscle sensations, not just psychological, nor just cognitive. It is bodily, affectively (emotionally) and cognitively meaningful before these three are split apart. Once a felt sense forms, it is found to lead to steps. New feelings, perceptions, and courses of action emerge. Focusing usually involves many steps before a problem is resolved. Therefore one is willing to receive and welcome what emerges at a given step. One knows it will soon change further. Whatever emerges is checked against the felt sense to see if it produces an immediately felt effect that signals the Tightness, for that moment, of what is said or done. When one changes one can feel this concretely, in a bodily way. Whatever words or procedures fail to attain to this “felt shift” are immediately discarded so that words or actions that do have this effect can form.

HISTORY

Experiential Focusing comes from a series of research studies (Gendlin, et al., 1967) that found that those patients who were successful later were those who, during tape-recorded therapy, often attended to what was felt but not yet cognitively clear. This led to procedures to teach people exactly how to do what the research had found. My (Gendlin, 1962, 1973) logic of relationships between felt meaning and symbols led to specific definitions, especially the difference between felt sense and feelings of the usual type.

TECHNIQUE

Experiential Focusing gets into direct touch with the concrete level, in us, where our troubles really are. Most of psychotherapy consists of talking about, which doesn't reach down and touch, let alone change, that in us that needs changing. So we get wiser about what's wrong, without actually working with it.

The level, in us, where this concreteness is, is below thinking and emotions. Even feeling familiar emotions intensely often does not put us in touch with what they come from. There is a level below them. To reach it one has to be willing to be a little confused, unclear, for a minute or two. It works this way:

One asks for a felt sense of the whole problem to form. This isn't something most people usually have. Most people go right into their problem to their usual bad place, and they feel bad and stuck. Focusing begins by asking you not to go to your usual place, inside the problem, just yet. Instead, let a whole sense of it come. "What is it like, having that whole problem, just now?" (It takes less than a minute for such a holistic sense of the entire problem to form. But it must form. It isn't just there.)

Getting such a holistic sense, one next asks: "What is that whole feeling?" And the answer will be one word or a phrase, such as "scary" or "heavy" or perhaps a private word like "funny." Or it might be a gesture, like clutching oneself. The move here is to get a handle on this whole felt sense of the whole problem, by finding one word that gets it just right.

The hardest part of focusing is to let a felt sense form, as just described. It takes a little patience. At first, most people get a lot of words: explanations, arguments at themselves, or a lot of heavy emotions. A felt sense is none of these. It is a direct bodily sense, but it isn't conceptually clear. It's a feel for the whole problem, not the emotions in the problem.

As an example of a felt sense, think of two people you know. Got them? Pick them now, then the example will work for you. Now, take the first one. You get a distinct feel quality for that person, the whole feel of them, their

texture or taste, or quality, so to speak. It includes everything you have ever experienced with them, everything they ever did that you know about, how you have ever seen them. Yet it is none of these things one by one. It is a feel of them, a felt sense.

Now switch to the other person; notice that you get a very different felt sense. It would take a lot of words, and some time, to say what these two felt senses are like, but you can feel them directly.

Once you have a hold of the felt sense of a problem, then stay with that for a minute or two. Don't do anything; just see what it does. If it changes or moves, let it. Just say something like: "What's so scary?" (or whatever one-word handle you have on it). But it's important not to answer that question; just ask it and let the felt sense be there and expect the felt sense, after a while, to do the answering.

When a felt sense "answers," it also shifts. One can feel a concrete release or movement, bodily. Perhaps also an involuntary breath "Whew ... yes, that's what's so scary." Words that come with a felt shift, are usually right. One checks such words back: "Is that right? ... whew, yeah." The individual feels the release over again.

Sometimes there are small steps before there's a bigger shift. Words come to say something that's clearly right, but there is no big body release.

Let's say what comes is "What's scary is he'll leave me." Then the next step would be, "OK, what's so scary about him leaving me?" Again it is important to let the felt sense answer the question. It takes a few moments, repeating the question, not answering it.

Of course the person in my example knows many reasons why she'd be scared of his leaving. But those known arguments get in the way, and one can lose hold of the feeling. To get it back, she asks "Can I still feel that scared" and wait. After a few moments, there it is again. She waits to see what comes from the feeling. She lets the words come from the feeling, ignoring all other words. "What's so scary about his leaving?" Can I still feel it?... yeah ... there it is, again. What's that?" (One shouldn't answer; let it answer, wait with it.) Whatever comes, she takes it and goes another step. Why again is that, now? And don't answer, let it. There should be one big step, a felt shift, a big release, a big "Whew..." There are exact steps for focusing, but the above will give some idea.

Such a big felt shift is a sign of real change, and after it, it's time to stop focusing for a while. Everything is now a little different. It takes the body a time to let that change filter through everything else. It may not solve the problem but there is a distinct unquestionable sense of being in a somewhat different place, and not just verbally, not just conceptually, but in a concrete, living, bodily sense.

The method of focusing cuts across all methods of therapy. All can work if used with focusing, and none work well without it. Without focusing most therapy is just talking about, or it is painful potshots that can hit something, that doesn't add up to a continuing self-propelled change process. Also, with focusing one knows when one is changing; it is a concrete, body experience. Many people in therapy or working on themselves wonder if it's getting them any further. But if one can't sense oneself changing, one probably isn't.

Focusing lets one use whatever anyone (including therapists) says. There is no need either to believe or to disbelieve someone's interpretation of you. You can go straight down to where it's at, and be in touch — and then, if you try the interpretation there, it either produces a felt shift or it does not. If not, then it isn't right, at least not now.

The experience of focusing, once you have it, lets you sense your own inward concreteness. The body senses inwardly, and is wiser than the mind. The body totals up the millions of details you can't think of, except one by one. Focusing is between the ordinary level of thoughts and emotions, and the deep level of meditation, where there is no content at all.

APPLICATIONS

Experiential Focusing has been used in psychotherapy and taught to schizophrenics (Prouty, 1977), "borderline" patients, and people generally

(van den Bos, 1973).

Focusing is also being applied in a spiritual context, in creative writing, in business (Iberg, 1978), in problem solving (Zimring, 1974; Kantor, 1976), with EEG correlates of felt shift, in dance, in healing (Olsen, 1978), with imagery (Gendlin, 1970), and in relation to dreams.