

About Focusing by Emily Agnew

Focusing is an inner skill based on the philosophy that each human being is really a “human becoming.” When you think about it, this makes sense. We are constantly in process, on every level. Each of your cells is a process; your respiratory and digestive systems are processes; your emotions and your relationships are constantly in process. And your growth and maturing as a person are certainly processes.

But sometimes you don't get what you need for these processes to move forward in their natural way. If you feel stuck, limited, or in pain, that means a process got stopped in you somewhere. Stoppages limit your life in some way. Big life traumas can limit your life in a big way.

Focusing helps you be with yourself in such a way that stuck processes in you can now move forward. This requires you to move beyond what you consciously know, so you can sense and articulate what wants to come next.

This “what wants to come next” could be an insight, a realization, a shift of perspective, or an action. Whatever the form, it is accompanied by an unmistakable sense of rightness. The rightness is quite physical and satisfying, as when you finally remember where you put your keys and feel that “Oh! That's where they are!”

Why does this matter?

Because Focusing gives you the tools you need to know yourself deeply and to unblock any places you are stuck in your life. It helps you live with integrity through your actions and choices.

Focusing is a powerful tool to be with the “sensed-but-not-yet-clear.” It's easy to dismiss your subtle, vague, uncertain body senses. This is a mistake! They are invariably a gateway to some significant need, concern, or insight. If you want to live and take action in integrity with yourself, you need a way to honor these fuzzy, unclear “somethings.”

Focusing is also a powerful tool to make decisions where the options appear known and clear, yet none of them feels right. Your life unfolds through your countless daily decisions, and the most important decisions are complex, nuanced, and subtle. This kind of decision, for which there is no answer that could be judged to be “right” from an external perspective, quickly exhausts the limits of your intellect.

When this happens, you can go over and over what you consciously know, without further insight arising. Or you can turn to focusing to access the vast

intelligence contained in your whole body. This includes what is in your head, but it includes so much more than that: the past, the full complexity of the present, and the implied future.

All this comes together in an embodied felt sense of the situation that includes what you consciously know, but it isn't limited to it. As you hold this whole felt sense, you get new clarity and direction.

Where did Focusing come from?

We have a University of Chicago philosopher and psychologist named Eugene Gendlin to thank for identifying Focusing and figuring out a way to teach it. In the early 1950's, Gendlin led a large-scale study analyzing the factors influencing therapy outcomes.

Gendlin and his team were startled and chagrined to discover they could predict a therapy client's likelihood of success, *from the first session!* Analyzing the data, they were forced to acknowledge that the skill of the therapist was not the primary factor influencing the success of the therapy. This flew in the face of all previous assumptions. If therapist skill wasn't creating client success, then what was?

The key contributor to better therapy outcomes was *the client's ability to refer freshly to something in them.*

Gendlin named this "something" the client's "*felt experiencing.*" And he observed that some clients seemed instinctively to know how to reference and be with this felt experiencing in way that created inner movement and progress.

At key moments, these more successful clients would slow down and stop talking. They seemed to be referencing something inside them. They'd fumble for words or create new unusual phrases trying to describe what they were sensing. Instead of *talking about* or *analyzing* their problems, they were using their verbal and intellectual capacity *to describe the whole felt sense* of their inner experience.

And when they finally found words that described this present-moment inner experience, they'd get visible, audible shifts. They'd say things like, "Oh! *That's it!*" They'd sigh deeply or cry or experience some kind of obvious physical release. From this new place in themselves, they'd have a sense of new possibilities in what previously seemed like an impossible situation.

Gendlin identified this skill of sensing and describing the whole felt sense, and he named it Focusing.

Gendlin perceived the power of this skill to contribute to human growth and well-being—and not only in a therapy setting. He developed a way to teach people to sense their felt experiencing. He called the process Focusing. Through Focusing, you can access the wisdom of your whole body—your *felt experiencing* of an issue or situation.

Focusing is used for emotional healing, but also for all sorts of creative and problem-solving fields. Gendlin taught it as a six-step process. Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin, students of Gendlin, have since developed a new way of teaching focusing called Inner Relationship Focusing. (I've completed an intensive two-year certification process in Inner Relationship Focusing.)

Do you know what it feels like to focus?

If you meditate, then you've most likely gotten at least a glimpse of something vast beyond your thinking brain.

But whether you meditate or not, have you ever sensed there was something bothering you about a situation, and you wondered what it was? If so, you may have had an inner conversation with yourself:

“Something about this is really bothering me. Is it because she _____? ...no, that's not it...Oh! It's because she didn't ask me first! That's it. I'd have been OK with it if she had just asked me first...”

This is the feel of Focusing: paying attention, wondering, describing until you feel that body shift to “Oh! That's it!” And you can learn to invite and be with all kinds of subtle or complex issues to get these kinds of shifts.

While you can Focus alone, it is much easier for most people to hold the curious listening presence of Focusing when you have company. This could be a Focusing partner who also knows the process, or an experienced Focusing teacher like me who guides you through the process.

Emily Agnew is a certified Focusing Trainer, guiding clients in Focusing and teaching Focusing partnership. Her programs at Luminos Listening incorporate Focusing to help you build a rich inner relationship, a sturdy, flexible personal infrastructure, and a strong connection to your Inner Source. To learn more, visit www.luminoslistening.com/services.

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