



The Power of Focusing

[From Chapter 3 of [The Power of Focusing](#) by [Ann Weiser Cornell](#)]

Imagine that you are in a meadow, at the edge of a forest. As you stand there quietly, you see a shy animal peeking out of the woods. You know that this animal is not dangerous to you, nor you to it, and you would like to help it feel safe with you. What would you do? What mood would you try to create? What would you not do?

You would not run toward it, shouting. You would be still and patient. If you moved, you would move slowly and gently. You would be attentive to it, interested in it, watching it carefully for signs that it might be OK for you to move a little closer.

Focusing is a process of listening to something inside you that wants to communicate with you. And yet, like a shy animal, it may first need to discover that you are trustworthy, and that you have created a safe place for it, before it can deliver its message. In this chapter we will talk about how to create the climate of safety and trust in your inner world that makes Focusing possible.

Letting it be as it is

Take a moment to notice what you are feeling right now and see if it is possible to simply let the feeling be there. Good, bad, or indifferent; angry, sad, or scared; bored, restless, or joyful - just notice how you are right now, and notice if you can say, "Yes, that is how I feel."

Notice whether it is difficult or unfamiliar to let your feelings be there. You may have a tendency, as many people do, to judge your feelings as soon as you notice them: "I shouldn't be feeling that way. What a horrible person I am to feel that!" You may try to be "reasonable" about your feelings: "There's no reason to be scared." Or you may try to talk yourself out of your feelings: "Oh, it's not that bad. Other people have it worse." Or you may try to analyze your feelings, asking yourself: "Why? Why do I always feel this way? Why can't I change?"

As you may have noticed, none of these ways is effective in helping you change. Every time you judge yourself, or try to talk yourself out of your feelings, or try to figure out why you are feeling this way, you just stay in the same place, and probably feel even worse about yourself.

But I can tell you with absolute assurance, for I've seen this hundreds of times and never seen it fail: when you allow your feelings to be as they are, then they can change. When you try to change them, they stay unchanged. Gene Gendlin put it so well:

What is split off, not felt, remains the same. When it is felt, it changes. Most people don't know this. They think that by not permitting the feeling of their negative ways they make themselves good. On the contrary, that keeps these negatives static, the same from year to year. A few moments of feeling it in your body allows it to change. If there is in you something bad or sick or unsound, let it inwardly be, and breathe. That's the only way it can evolve and change into the form it needs.

The inner climate of letting it inwardly be is necessary for inner change. And this is the good news. You may think that allowing your feelings to be will make them bigger, or will give them permission to go out of control. You will find that just the opposite is the case. Your feelings get bigger and more painful when they *aren't* allowed to be. When they are allowed to be, they settle down to have a conversation with you, and that conversation leads to change, as we will see.

Being in a relationship with your feelings

Being in a relationship with your inner experience allows you to be *with* your feelings, not *in* them. Many people think that the only way to change strong emotions is to jump right into the middle of them, feel them intensely, and get *through* them. When you're reluctant to do that, you may call yourself "resistant" and "afraid to change."

Focusing, however, teaches us that change comes more easily from a *relationship* with your feelings. And you can't have a relationship with something if you're up to your neck in it!

Think of your emotions as a big lake. You have a choice: you can plunge into the lake, or you can sit next to it. Focusing works best when you "sit next to" what you feel instead of plunging into it.

When you have a relationship with something, you can sense it as a whole. When you're in the

middle of it, it's harder to know it - just as it's hard for a fish to know water. When I assisted Gene Gendlin in teaching Focusing he would say, "If you want to know what the soup smells like, it's better not to stick your head in it."

When you have a relationship with what's there, you are able to be its listener. It is able to tell you its story. If you are it, then there's no one else to hear the story. This inner relationship is how you give yourself the healing presence that is so powerful and helpful.

If you find yourself saying, "I am sad," try changing that to "*Part of me* is sad," or "I have a sad feeling," or "*I'm aware of something* that feels sad." Now the sad feeling becomes something you can *be with* instead of feeling all over, because it's part of you, not all of you.

Being a good listener to your self

Do you remember a time when someone listened to you, really listened? Do you remember how good it felt to be heard? Perhaps you began to understand yourself better, and you clarified what you were thinking and feeling, simply because someone was listening.

Perhaps you also remember a time when you wanted to express yourself and be heard, but the other person didn't hear you. Instead, perhaps they criticized, or told you about their own experience, or offered well-meaning advice. Advice isn't listening. If you wanted to be heard and you got criticism or advice instead, you probably became more confused or frustrated or upset instead of more clear. And you probably felt you wouldn't come back to that person again when you needed to be heard.

Focusing is being a good listener to your inner self. There are parts of you that want to be heard, without judgment, without criticism, without advice. In Focusing, you can give yourself that non-judgmental listening that feels good and brings greater clarity.

The qualities of good listening are:

- A welcoming presence
- Holding the space
- Hearing the essence
- Staying in present time.

A welcoming presence means you are interested in everything you become aware of inside. Each feeling you become aware of, no matter how ugly or negative it appears at first, has a good reason for

being the way it is. A welcoming presence gives it the space to be and breathe, evolve and transform.

Holding the space means bringing your awareness to your inner world and holding it there. It's as if you're saying to your inner self, "I'm here and I'm staying with you."

Hearing the essence means listening for what is longing to be heard. When something first comes forward, its message may be difficult to understand. If you keep listening for what "it" wants you to hear, the message will become clearer and clearer.

Staying in present time means not being distracted by dwelling on what happened in the past, or on fantasies or fears about the future. It means staying in touch with how you're feeling in your body right now, even when what you are focusing on is related to the past or the future. Whenever you find you have drifted away from the present, ask yourself, "How am I feeling in my body right now? What am I aware of right now?"

Being a friend to your felt sense

Focusing is like being a friend to your own inner experience. The qualities of true friendship include acknowledging, allowing, patience, curiosity, respect, warmth, welcome, empathy, compassion, and love. If you don't feel you can be *that* much of a friend to yourself immediately, don't worry - you'll be able to build up to it, step by step. And the first step is as simple as saying hello.

When you notice you're having a feeling, say to the feeling, "Hello. I know you're there." This might seem ridiculously simple, but it's actually such a powerfully helpful move that you'll probably feel relief just from doing this alone. It's amazing how often we don't do this. We ignore how we feel, we try to get rid of how we feel, we argue with how we feel - but we're not actually acknowledging how we feel. We treat our felt senses like unwelcome party guests, to be talked *about* but never directly spoken *to*.

If your felt senses are at all scary or intense, saying hello becomes even more important. "I feel this constriction in my chest, and it's getting tighter and tighter!" said Rebecca. "You might just say hello to it," I suggested. "Oh! Now it's easing up quite a bit!" she reported, amazed that simply acknowledging could make such a difference.

The reason that acknowledging is so powerful is that your felt senses are here to communicate with you. Excuse me for talking about felt senses as if they were people, but the truth is, they *want* you to listen. They want to be heard. That constriction was

probably getting tighter and tighter because it was panicked about whether it would be heard. As soon as Rebecca acknowledged it, it was able to relax a little, because it knew that she knew it was there, and that she would listen to its story.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to say hello to what you find in your body. I've seen over and over how people skip over this step and find themselves in trouble. For example, Catherine had a tightness in her shoulders that she had been feeling for weeks. She wanted to focus on it. The people in the workshop watched as she rolled her neck impatiently and said, "I want to ask this what it's all about, but it won't talk to me. I feel stuck." Then she looked down at the card she had received at the beginning of the workshop and saw the sentence, *I'm saying hello to what's here.* "Oh," she said, "I haven't said hello to it yet."

Then the other workshop participants saw a remarkable transformation. Catherine's face flushed, her head stopped rolling, and tears sprang to her eyes. "I've *never* said hello to it!" she exclaimed. "I've called it bad, I've tried to get rid of it, I've shamed it, I've tried to fix it - but I've never actually said hello." From that moment on the tightness in her shoulders began to release and by the end of the session, after it had given its message, Catherine experienced her body quite differently.

Focusing is about having a positive and supportive *relationship* with yourself. Every relationship begins with hello. It isn't respectful to start a conversation without first saying hello. So give your felt sense a hello first of all, and the rest of your friendship with it will naturally follow.

When you're not feeling friendly

Sometimes you just can't bring yourself to be friendly to your felt sense. And that's OK - you can still do Focusing. Just move your awareness to the part of you that isn't feeling friendly. Say hello to *that*. The not - friendly feeling, whatever it is, becomes the new felt sense.

Tom was feeling fear in his belly. He recognized it as an old fear, one that he had felt many times before. When he asked himself to be "like a friend" to this fear, he could feel an angry impatience rising in his body. "I'm so sick of always getting scared, right when things are getting good!"

So Tom said hello to the angry, impatient feeling. This is different from staying *in* the anger and impatience, continuing to *be* angry and impatient. This is more like stepping aside slightly, noticing or

"witnessing" what is felt. Instead of trying to force himself to be friendly to the original feeling, the fear, Tom simply moved his friendly attitude to the anger and impatience about the fear.

When something is in the way of being friendly and accepting, we call this the *feeling about the feeling*. It might be: "I'm angry about this fear," or "I'm afraid of this sadness," or "I'm impatient with this stuck place."

Trying to push your way past this feeling won't work. If you ignore it, your Focusing will get stuck at this exact point. That's because the feeling about the feeling is a signal that something else is coming up that needs attention.

Two things may happen, and they're both fine. Often, after you've spent some time with the feeling about the feeling, it relaxes and lets you go back to the original feeling. But sometimes the whole remainder of the session is about the feeling about the feeling. This is wonderfully rewarding, because it often relates to a central part of how you are in the world. When it changes, ripples of change spread through your whole life.

Hearing all the voices

We often believe that we must feel only one way about something. Ambivalence is wrong, we think. But it is the most natural thing in the world to have mixed feelings. A part of us wants to get to know someone better, another part of us is scared to get too close. A part of us feels angry that we haven't been consulted in a decision, but another part is frightened of the consequences of expressing that anger.

Focusing allows all the parts of our self to be heard. And when their messages have been received, they change. You don't have to choose between different parts; they can all be there at the same time. They can each have their own space. And a special kind of magic can happen when we are able to be with all the different parts. Out of that can come something that is better than and different from any of the parts, and yet all the parts have given something essential to the new synthesis.

We are complex beings in an ambiguous world. We are full of often contradictory feelings and thoughts. It can be liberating to realize that we don't have to be monolithic. With Focusing, we learn how to welcome, acknowledge, and accept all our responses to life - whatever they are. We can feel all our variety and subtlety, all our richness and complexity.

The wisdom of not knowing

Be willing to approach your inner experience without thinking that you know all about it already. This is the attitude of *not knowing*. Why would you listen to someone if you think you already know what he or she has to say? When you treat your felt sense this way - for example, "I already know why I'm afraid" - you block your opportunity to find out what it's really about.

You might be asking, "But what if I do already know?" Let me say this: as long as there is still a felt sense wanting your attention, there is something about it you don't know yet. If you are still experiencing tightness, fear, constriction, or stuckness, there is something your body knows and is trying to tell you.

So be curious, open, and more interested in what you *don't* know yet than in what you already know. Try acknowledging what you already know about what you're Focusing on and then setting that aside. Not because it's wrong - it might not be - but because it might be getting in the way of sensing what is new and not yet known about you and your life.

Our modern culture puts a great premium on clarity. We are taught that if we can't think or say something clearly, then it's not important. The winner in school is the one who gets "the answer" the fastest - see those hands shoot up! It's rarely acknowledged that there is a valuable kind of knowing that is vague at first and takes time to access.

The bias for clarity can lead to feeling uncomfortable in the face of something unclear and unknown. "How would I explain this to anyone? How would I defend it? What good is it?" Before you learned to honor and listen to felt senses, you might have dismissed them in just this way.

Instead, enjoy them! When a felt sense first comes, you may not know what to call it, and you may not know what it is. Let that be OK. You will learn to delight in that not-knowing, to look eagerly for the parts of your experience that are not yet known, just as a treasure hunter is most excited by the treasure chests that have not yet been opened.

It may not seem likely that there would be wisdom hiding in this fuzzy, vague, hard-to-describe *something* that you feel in your body, but there is. That's exactly where the wisdom is: not in what is already clear and known - that's *old* information - but in what is *emerging* in you, the knowing that is

coming into awareness right now. Learning Focusing is learning to value and even cherish the slow, subtle, and vague.

Following the felt sense

You can trust the felt sense to lead you to the center of the maze. It knows which way to go. All you have to do is follow and it will lead you right to the center. It wants to go there; it wants you to come, too. But only it knows the way, only it can take you there. To find your way, you need to trust it. You need to let go of controlling which direction you're going in. You have to let go of analyzing and asking why and judging.

You can try lots of things during the process that may be very helpful - but the *results* are beyond your control. You can't make the felt sense do anything it isn't ready and willing to do. You can't make it tell you anything, and you can't make it change - any more than you can make the shy animal your friend against its will. You can only try things and offer possibilities, respectfully and without expectations, and see what happens next. Trying to impose your will on the felt sense is an exercise in pure futility.

But trust and follow, and you will find that in the center of the maze lies the treasure you have been seeking.

Every Focusing session is unique

Remember that Focusing is a natural human process, and it is always more than we will be able to put into words. If there is one thing you can count on in Focusing, it's that you can't predict what is going to happen. Every time you sit down to do Focusing, especially at first; you may need to remind yourself that what happened last time probably won't happen today. It might be similar; it might be very different. It might feel like skipping along the surface; it might feel like deep sea diving. You might have lots of images today. You might have lots of detail about your life. It might be peaceful and quiet. There might be lots of tears. But the felt sense will only bring you what you can deal with, and if you trust it and flow with it, you will find a natural resting place, a warm shore, a little closer to home.

Ann Weiser Cornell, is the creator of [Inner Relationship Focusing](#) and author of *The Radical Acceptance of Everything*, *The Power of Focusing*, *Focusing in Clinical Practice*, and *Presence*.