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# Focusing

Eugene T. Gendlin

'Gendlin and his [University of Chicago] colleagues began asking why therapy succeeds for some patients, but not for many others. In their research they found that the successful patient could be spotted easily . . . Differences in methods of therapy meant little. . . What did count, the researchers concluded, "is what successful patients do inside themselves." They were focusing intuitively. The focusing skill - in which one makes "contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness" - can be learned by anyone in or out of therapy.'

—*Washington Post*

'I can't tell you how valuable *Focusing* is to the people I work with - around the world - who have used this powerful technique to relieve very disturbing symptoms of chronic pain, depression, anxiety, agitation and mania.'

—*Mary Ellen Copeland, M.S., author of Fibromyalgia & Chronic Myofascial Pain*

'Healing trauma requires having a "felt sense" (as one gets in focusing). It cannot be effectively dealt with through verbal or emotional expression alone. Bodily sensing is what allows the fixated moment to open to flow and transformation.'

—Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger*

'Focusing has been crucial for many bodyworkers. I would hope that it would be more widely integrated within the education of Somatics practitioners.'

—Don Hanlon Johnson, Ph.D., Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies

‘Philosophers are increasingly acknowledging that the system of thought undergirding focusing will be a vital roadmap for twenty-first century attempts to understand the human mind as reflected in the felt sense of embodied experiencing.’

—Ralph D. Ellis, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, Editor of the new journal, *Consciousness & Emotion*

‘Gendlin’s Focusing method has far-reaching implications for human life in community on this planet. He brings us a truly revolutionary notion: that what is vague and unclear, yet bodily felt, actually has more practical value than all the clear, well-articulated thoughts we may be thinking, and is the direct source of creativity, emotional healing and appropriate response to new circumstances. This profoundly impactful work will continue to grow in influence on psychology, philosophy, the arts, theory-building, and ultimately on how we live our lives.’

—Ann Weiser Cornell, author of *The Power of Focusing*

‘I have found Gendlin’s book and teachings to be an enormous resource in my life and work. The wisdom of our feelings has been ignored by the medical profession but it is the road to healing.’

—Bernie Siegel, M.D., author of *Love, Medicine & Miracles*

‘I continue to use the focusing technique. We have found it a most valuable tool.’

—O. Carl Simonton, M.D.

‘An original, innovative, exciting book’

—Carl Rogers

# **FOCUSING**

**REVISED AND UPDATED  
25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

Eugene T. Gendlin



**RIDER**

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# **INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION by Eugene T. Gendlin**

Twenty-five years ago when focusing was new, I shocked a colleague at the University by saying “The unconscious is the body.” By now an emphasis on the body as a source of information and innovation is not new. But exactly how one can tap into this source is not yet widely known. Only from the Focusing Community can one get well-developed and tested instructions for direct access to embodied knowledge and the new steps that come from it.

Today people live at various distances from this bodily source. I tell therapists: When your clients say something important, put your hand between your own stomach and chest, and ask them: “If you attend here, what comes in your body about this?” Therapy will immediately deepen with those clients who are already close to this source. The others will ask: “What do you mean?”

Check yourself. Notice where in my next few sentences you no longer know what I’m talking about. We can take you on further, from there.

You have a bodily orienting sense. You know who you are and how you come to be in this room, reading this page. To know this you don’t need to think. The knowing is physically sensed in your body and can easily be found. But this bodily knowing can extend much more deeply. You can learn how to let a deeper bodily felt sense come in relation to any specific situation. Your body “knows” the whole of each of your situations, vastly more aspects of it than you can think. Here you find an intricate bodily knowledge and new steps that want to come, and will come, if you can wait here.

After you find this deeper level, it takes practice to stay here. In a difficult moment most people cannot hold on to the body-sense of the situation long enough for steps to come. We can train you to do this. Most people don't know how to let the unclear felt sense "open" into a whole field of intricate detail from which new steps of thought and action emerge.

Focusing is now a worldwide network. People who know focusing ask: "What would be a right next step here?" But this can seem insane to the rest of our society. How could new realistic ideas and action steps arise from the body? Isn't the body just a machine? How can more come from the body than evolution, language and culture have built into it?

In philosophy the "objectivists" hold that human experience is an illusion emanating from brain structures and chemistry. Their opponents, the "relativists," hold that human experience is just a product of one of the many cultures, histories and languages. They say that underneath the variety there is nothing at all.

My philosophy leads to new concepts in physics and biology, to understand the human body differently. Your body is not a machine, rather a wonderfully intricate interaction with everything around you, which is why it "knows" so much just in being. The animals live intricately with each other without culture and language. The different cultures don't create us. They only add elaboration. The living body is always going beyond what evolution, culture and language have already built. The body is always sketching and probing a few steps further. Your ongoing living makes new evolution and history happen - now.

You can sense your living body directly under your thoughts and memories and under your familiar feelings. Focusing happens at a deeper level than your feelings. Under them you can discover a physically sensed "murky zone" which you can enter and open. This is the source from

which new steps emerge. Once found, it is a palpable presence underneath.

Social policy still assumes that human beings and animals are nothing but what science presents. For example, genetic engineering is now creating a cow-pig. It will have all lean meat. The company will corner the market for agricultural animals, never mind that the cow-pig is in pain. How we treat each other is often similar. Humans disappear in the current kind of science. Our science cannot even study the scientists themselves, and how they make the scientific concepts.

Science is not a game. Its truth is based on empirical testing. You wouldn't want to get on an untested airplane. We need our wonderful machines to work. But the basic method of this science renders everything it studies as machines.

This kind of science need not be the only kind. The holistic science of ecology shows that more than one kind of science is possible. My philosophy adds another kind, a first-person science that can study itself! It centers on the body sensed from inside, where new things arise. Using focusing, we have developed "Thinking At the Edge" (TAE), teachable steps to articulate something new in the field in which you work.

Our research on focusing is a small example of this potentially great new science. A long series of studies show from tape-recordings and tests that therapy has better outcomes when clients focus. Many other effects of focusing have also been measured, for example better functioning of the immune system. Focusing has been applied in many contexts including schools, businesses, spiritual groups, creative writing, and many settings.

When people first discover the power of focusing, they may think it is all they need. But focusing adds a deeper bodily level to other methods and can improve them. It cuts

across the others and should be combined with anything else that can develop us as persons.

More than 600 certified focusing trainers around the world are available on your private telephone. They can show you the beginning of focusing in one or several hours. Then you can also find a "Focusing Partner" on our web site with whom to divide time, take turns, usually also on the phone. Focusing Partnerships are not friendships, not therapy, not family. Focusing Partnership is a new social institution. Let me explain the need for it.

Currently the cultural routines and roles that used to connect us are insufficient. We have to innovate all day, find new ways to be a woman, man, wife, parent, teacher, executive, old person, young person. Our close relationships tend to fall apart. "Nobody seems to fit with me," people say. Each person is intricate inside, and lonely. Modern urban society is atomized.

For a while it seemed that just expressing our feelings would help our close relationships. Just blurt everything out. But what the other person hears can be so very different from what you meant to say, and sometimes hurtful. Similarly, we often react in ways that shut the other person down.

Therapists can listen to clients much more easily than to their own people who are closest to them. With close people one's whole life rises or sinks with each little bit one hears. But one can peacefully accompany clients to deeper levels where the steps of change and healing come. Then the clients can relate much more deeply and freely to their own close people. The new pattern of Focusing Partnerships makes this advantage of therapy available to everyone. A Focusing Partner costs nothing. You take turns. This new institution is changing the atomization of society.

During my time I am silent for some stretches and I speak some of the time. I say nothing I don't want to say. Speaking

from far inside lets me hear myself and live connectedly in a receptive interaction.

Partners give no advice, judgments, or comments. They may repeat something back just to check: “I think you are saying. . .”. But they need only say when they cannot follow, so that I can rephrase what I said. But my partner will pay close attention, wanting to grasp every wrinkle of what I mean.

A regular Focusing Partnership improves one’s life immensely. I would not want to do without mine. In fact, I have two. I use my time for focusing or for whatever I wish. When my turn begins I feel how inviting it is—it is just for me. I might know what I want, or spend some minutes, scanning. I think: “I might talk of this . . ., or, perhaps that . . ., well, perhaps first focus quietly. . . I could have any of those things.

We provide a few hours of telephone training in focusing, listening, and the experience of being listened to in a focusing way. Then you can select a partner from our Partnership Pool on the Web.

With focusing one knows that the human being in front of us is more than any method, any set of beliefs, purpose, or project. We limit whatever we do for the sake of what is always more important: keeping people unobtrusive company with whatever they are up against. To give people just our simple presence lets them be and breathe. We listen for what they mean to convey, and add nothing else. It makes for maximal closeness with minimal imposition.

**part one**

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**Unlocking  
the Wisdom  
of Your Body**

one

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## The Inner Act

At the University of Chicago and elsewhere in the past fifteen years, a group of colleagues and I have been studying some questions that most psychotherapists don't like to ask out loud. Why doesn't therapy succeed more often? Why does it so often fail to make a real difference in people's lives? In the rarer cases when it does succeed, what is it that those patients and therapists do? What is it that the majority *fail* to do?

Seeking answers, we studied many forms of therapy from classical approaches to recent ones. We analyzed literally thousands of therapist-patient sessions recorded on tape. Our series of studies has led to several findings, some very different from what we and most other professional therapists expected.

First, we found that the successful patient—the one who shows real and tangible change on psychological tests and in life—can be picked out fairly easily from recorded therapy sessions. What these rare patients do in their therapy hours is different from the others. The difference is so easy to spot that, once we had defined it, we were able to explain it to inexperienced young undergraduates, and they too were able to sort out the successful patients from the others.

What is this crucial difference? We found that it is not the therapist's technique—differences in methods of therapy seem to mean surprisingly little. Nor does the difference lie in what the patients talk about. The difference is in *how* they talk. And that is only an outward sign of the real difference: *what the successful patients do inside themselves.*

The purpose of this book is to tell you what they do and how you can do it. For this uncommon skill, this internal act, not only is useful in a psychotherapist's office, it is a way of approaching any problem or situation.

We have taught this skill to large numbers of people not in therapy in subsequent years. Now that it seems anyone can learn it, I also want this book to be readable by anyone. The book is addressed to professionals, but not only to them. Therefore I am writing it simply and not in the technical manner of my philosophical and scientific publications.

The skill we have observed and defined is not only for problems. Among those who know it, it becomes an internal source that is consulted many times every day. I am using it right now, in the process of writing this book.

The skill I am about to teach you is called *focusing*.

It will enable you to find *and change* where your life is stuck, cramped, hemmed in, slowed down. And it will enable *you* to change—to live from a deeper place than just your thoughts and feelings.

One fact that disturbed us the most in those research studies was that patients who did the crucial thing inside themselves could be picked out in the first two therapy sessions. We found we could predict success or failure right from the start just by analyzing the early interviews. According to a careful statistical analysis, there was less than a thousand-to-one chance of getting the same finding accidentally.

Today we know how to teach focusing. So this finding does *not* mean that some people cannot learn it. But at the time this was a shocking discovery. Here we had therapists and patients embarking on a year or more of hard effort. Much human need, hope, devotion, and money would be involved, and we already knew they would fail.

The finding means that psychotherapy as usually practiced doesn't show patients how to do psychotherapy. In other words, patients did not improve with practice. If they



did not somehow know right from the start how to approach themselves inside in that special way, they did not achieve major changes, no matter what they or their therapists did or how earnestly or for how long.

This finding was contrary to my predictions, and to what had been my own firm subjective conviction. I *thought* I had *experienced* the gradual opening and increasing ability of patients to come into touch with their feelings. I had been certain that patients learn to do psychotherapy in themselves over the course of treatment, and do it more effectively in the second half. I had had many experiences of beginning with patients who seemed inept at sensing themselves inwardly, and, by my own skills as a therapist, and with the patients' efforts, I had brought many such patients to a successful resolution of their problems.

One reason why research is so important is precisely that it can surprise you and tell you that your subjective convictions are wrong. If research always found what we expected, there wouldn't be much point in doing research.

With hindsight I realize I was thinking only of the successful patients and not of the many patients with whom I failed. Now we know how to teach these people the crucial skill as well.

The research shows plainly, and repeatedly, that *successful* patients do indeed improve in this key skill, but the research also shows that they had it to some extent right at the beginning. The others, those who failed, did not have it at all and never achieved it through psychotherapy alone. At that time we did not know how to teach it.

Most therapists don't know what this crucial internal approach is, let alone how to help patients learn it. So I was led to wonder: can it be taught?

My first feeling, stemming from my training as a psychotherapist, was to say no, it can't be taught. I was trained to believe that only a very naive therapist would try to tell the patient in words how therapy works. Someone

who hasn't experienced it wouldn't understand the words. Psychotherapy was supposed to be an art, a mystery, not a science. Some groups claim to have developed exact scientific techniques, but this is only a propaganda claim. The omniscient and totally self-assured psychotherapist exists only in the movies. Of course, each school of therapists has its own ideas and techniques, but they all know that they stumble around confusedly when their techniques don't work, which is more often than not. Therefore no serious psychotherapist would claim to be able to put into words exactly what makes therapy work, how to make changes happen inside a person. Only therapy itself was supposed to teach how.

But the research had shown that therapy does not teach how to those who don't already *know* how. The research had also shown very specifically what the crucial inner act is. Was it naive, now, to think it might be teachable?

Despite my doubts, I set out to see if I could make that all-important inner act teachable. With many people's help, I gradually devised specific directions for doing what those rare successful patients had somehow known how to do. We tried those directions out on large numbers of people and revised them and tried them again many times over a period of years. Those instructions have now become very specific and very teachable. Research conducted in several places has shown that people can be taught effectively in these ways to perform that internal act (see appendix).

Since this crucial internal act can be taught, and is not taught by therapy, people need not be therapy patients to learn it. What follows from this fact is a kind of revolution. No longer need this change process be in the charge of therapists. *People can do it for themselves and with each other.*

Of course they are not "therapists" or "doctors" or "authorities" with each other, but the authority aspect of the medical doctor never has really fitted the human

process of personal change at all. Human problems are by their very nature such that we are each inherently in charge of ourselves. No authority can resolve our problems or tell us how to live. Therefore I and others have been teaching more and more people to help themselves and each other.

This book will let you experience and recognize when actual change is happening in you, and when it's not. There is a distinct physical sensation of change, which you recognize once you have experienced it. We call it a body shift. When people have this even once, they no longer helplessly wonder for years whether they are changing or not. Now they can be their own judges of that. Often, when focusing is taught to a new group, some people experience a bodily shift, a step toward resolution of a problem they have discussed with a therapist for many years without change. They are shocked. Could a few minutes of this let me experience more change than I've had in my expensive psychotherapy?

People still think of the therapist as an authority. Even if patients feel no change, they think "the doctor" must know what's happening. If "the doctor" thinks they should keep coming, they accept it as necessary. They think something "must be happening." As someone wrote me recently: "When I confronted my therapist about there being no change, he thought it was all right if I have a paid friend for the rest of my life. I never went back . . . but after four years!"

When the revolution in self-help fully takes place and people generally learn and do these helpful processes with each other, will professional psychotherapy be unnecessary? I think expert help will always be wanted. But it will have to be better than what ordinary people can do when trained in *specific* skills. People will know how to recognize, unmistakably, whether they are being helped or not.