

Amona Buechler has been studying and practicing Focusing in various countries in and diverse contexts since 2013. She will teach two Focusing workshops in June 2018 in Chicago, one for beginners, and one for those with some experience. Here she is interviewed on Focusing by Evanston-based writer Clare LaPlante.

1. Q: What is a brief definition of Focusing?

Amona:

The *Focusing Method* arose out of a question that University of Chicago psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin asked in the 1950s: Why does psychotherapy work for some people and not for others?

For 15 years, he and his team listened to thousands of audiotapes of therapy sessions, and came to the conclusion that therapy was successful for those who could listen, or feel inside of themselves. For those clients who could not listen into themselves, therapy became just talking, a mental activity, a little temporary relief, but with no or few long-term results.

So Gendlin said, 'OK, if this is the difference, how can people be trained to feel inside themselves?'

And basically that's what Focusing is about: Can we learn to listen inwardly and arrive at what Gendlin called the *Felt Sense*, or our present, internal, bodily felt experience? Often, this Felt Sense is vague and subtle. It may include a physical sensation, for example tight shoulders. It could be an image, say a cloud or a bell, or it could be what is sometimes described as the atmosphere of the inner body, for example, an ambience of coolness or pressure.

Our Felt Sense is an expression of our relationship with ourselves and with those around us. As the Focuser continues to stay with the Felt Sense, something emerges, perhaps the words that fit perfectly the inner felt sense, or it could be a feeling of profound relief, or an understanding. Something comes into Focus.

Practically speaking, Focusing is usually done in pairs, with one Focuser, and one listener, who is called the Companion. Once in a

while, the Focuser expresses in words what calls for attention. The Companion will sometimes repeat, or reflect back, what the Focuser said. As the Companion reflects back the Focuser's words, the Focuser listens. He or she feels inside to notice how the words resonate. This slows down the whole process of inner listening.

Focusing is a non-judgmental attitude of curiosity and inquiry, a here-and-now process.

2. What are benefits of Focusing?

Amona:

The Focuser often goes from a sense of heaviness, tiredness, or confusion, into a feeling of lightness, or of spaciousness. This body shift is often felt as a feeling of relief. The fact that these body shifts typically last after the session is over, I believe, is an indication that we now have a changed the relationship with ourselves, and perhaps to the situation on which we have been Focusing. This can allow us to get unstuck from repetitive emotional and mental spirals.

Also, when I, as a Focuser, share my experience, I allow myself to be seen, which is one way of bringing things into the light. Also, the Companion has no agenda. He or she is there to be present: Just listening, accepting, and internally saying 'Yes,' to the Focuser's experience. Very simply, the Companion is there to hold the space, acknowledging whatever shows up as valid. Therefore, I am encouraged to get distance from my own issues. I can develop a friendly relationship with all that's there.

Focusing can help us make decisions. It can help us seek and maintain positive relationships, whether with partners, colleagues, or friends. It is a path to finding self-acceptance and presence--to finding a sense of arriving into the moment.

To give you an example, the following is how Focusing recently impacted my life:

A while back, I had a huge disappointment when I was not accepted as a contributor for a workshop. I was in great emotional turmoil. I heard those voices in my head telling me that I was treated unfairly; I

felt the tears in my chest welling up, and I felt a sense of being small and collapsed.

In a Focusing session, when I fully acknowledged and made contact with this Felt Sense, asking it what it needed, and just waiting and being with it, suddenly I saw that the disappointment about the loss of work was a minor part of the emotional pain. More importantly, there had been hopes and wishes for friendship, mutual inspiration and respect, and a need for recognition of my capacities.

These realizations arose as I attended to the Felt Sense, feeling it in a friendly way, asking it what it needed. Suddenly, deep breaths happened spontaneously. A sense of joy returned spontaneously, although the outer circumstances had not changed, just a seeing had happened.

While every Focusing session is very different, and this is just one of many examples, any shift of perception that happens also takes place on a physical level. Ideally, we take time to stay with the changed Felt Sense, to recognize it, give it space, absorb it, and appreciate it.

3. Talk a little bit more about the Felt Sense. Is this something we can learn to get in touch with in our day-to-day lives, even when we're not in a formal Focusing session?

Amona: Yes, absolutely! When we learn to get in touch with our Felt Sense in our daily lives--not just when we are formally Focusing--we can change our unfruitful habits!

For example, let's say our parents were overly cautious, and every time we crossed the street when we were younger, they were afraid of an accident. Later in life this same Felt Sense of anxiety is still in us as a certain inner-body experience, it has been imprinted, and arises every time when we cross the street. When we learn to notice the Felt Sense, we may realize that it is outdated, and certainly out of proportion to the actual situation.

We are reacting to something like an internal imprint, rather than a real-life situation. As we learn to be with this Felt Sense long enough, and as we consciously acknowledge it, give it space, maybe ask it what it needs, we can slowly choose a different path. Eventually, a different Felt Sense response develops, more appropriate to the

actual situation.

So developing the habit of discerning the Felt Sense can be highly beneficial in any situation. When we can get in touch with the Felt Sense, we can take responsibility for situations, rather than blaming someone else or ourselves. We will find solutions to problems more easily.

4. I know you have been meditation teacher for more than a decade. Now you teach Focusing as well. How does Focusing differ from meditation, and what value do you feel is added with this new practice?

Amona:

In meditation you are alone with yourself, in Focusing, in some way you are in relationship with someone else. Also, in Focusing the process is more geared toward generating change. Whatever the Focuser finds inside, he or she begins to interact with it. For example, as I mentioned above, if the Focuser encounters something difficult or unclear, he will explore his relationship with it, rather than just being a witness to it, and letting it be.

The difference between this and meditation as I see it, then, is that in meditation practice we are encouraged to just be with whatever is, and to be with it as a silent witness, which, over time, facilitates an inner atmosphere of acceptance. In Focusing, we assume that anything that is experienced as a Felt Sense has a meaning, or a message, and this particular way in which we relate to the Felt Sense while Focusing somehow extracts the meaning, which may be verbal or beyond verbal.

5. Can Focusing and meditation be used as companions?

Amona:

Certainly! Whenever we are unclear about something, there is repetition, whether in thoughts or feelings. Focusing breaks this cycle of repetition. It gets one unstuck, it opens up space for something new.

Therefore, meditation will be more effective, just as psychotherapy

becomes more effective for those who learn to feel into themselves. Both in therapy and meditation, many of us have a tendency to get caught in thinking. Focusing allows you to get into the Felt Sense in the body - which is much more than just sensation – and thereby helps you to be in the present moment.

And, inversely, meditation supports Focusing, because Focusing becomes most effective when you slow down, when you are in meditative inner state. In meditation, you learn to consciously be with that which is uncomfortable, to stay with it longer than we typically would. We can take that skill into Focusing.

But certainly, even if you've never meditated before, Focusing--or learning how to identify and stay with the Felt Sense--helps anybody and everybody. Being able to identify the Felt Sense is foundational for life. Any experience that we have in life--for example, listening to music, attending a party, flying to a new country, interacting with our partner, or interacting at work—goes along with a Felt Sense. As we learn to very deliberately listen to this Felt Sense and refine our perception of it, and find some words that fit it just right, we get to know how we relate to our environment and to ourselves.

6. What does a Focusing workshop look like?

Amona:

A Focusing workshop starts with the explanation as well as experiencing what we call the Felt Sense. Most of the time, we offer partner exercises. Students learn the skill of expressing a Felt Sense, as well as to listen to a partner without interpretation or judgment. The Focuser as well as the companion learn to use language that supports presence, rather than using language that is an expression of being fully immersed in, or entangled in the experience. As an example, you will notice each expression feels slightly different: “I am angry...” – being it, or entangled in the experience. “Something in me is angry...” – looking at it, still immersed in it. “I am sensing something in me is angry...” – looking at the feeling, or bringing presence to the experience.

When we teach people how to Focus, we have many possible exercises from which to choose. Everybody won't get them all, but

each person will be able to relate to one or two. And that's all they need. Then they will develop their own personal Focusing skills, their preferences and unique style. You can learn Focusing on your own, but a workshop is a much faster way of learning. It provides the structure and atmosphere in which to learn, and the interaction with others is very supportive.

And, very importantly, also students learn how to stay with difficult, unpleasant experiences long enough to have beneficial outcomes.

7. Is Focusing difficult to learn?

Amona:

It's not so hard to learn, but it can be endlessly refined. As we learn more about Focusing, the process of becoming unstuck becomes faster and faster every time. And we soon see the benefits.

A student recently said the following about a Focusing workshop:

“Focusing is a method where all parts in me can be expressed--all parts of me can be voiced. It also increases my awareness of self, so that I know more clearly what I am feeling and thinking. I can notice my patterns in a non-judgmental way. And, finally, Focusing helps me to develop self-compassion and inner clarity that feels very grounded. I can make more whole-hearted decisions.”