

Amona Buechler has been studying and practicing Focusing in various countries and diverse contexts since 2013. She offers both Focusing Sessions, as well as workshops for those who want to learn the process for themselves. Here she is interviewed on Focusing by Evanston (US, Illinois) based writer Clare LaPlante.

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

Amona:

The Focusing process arose out of a question that University of Chicago philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin explored in a research study in the 1950s and 1960s: He asked: Why does psychotherapy work for some people and not for others?

Under the guidance of psychologist Carl Rogers and with the help of graduate students, Gendlin listened to thousands of audiotapes of therapy sessions. He concluded that lasting positive change could be realized by those clients who could access a nonverbal, bodily feel of issues that came up during therapy. For those who were unable to listen to their internal, non-verbal cues, therapy offered a little temporary relief but without the longed for long-term changes.

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

And, basically, that's what Focusing is about: We learn to deepen our inward listening and arrive at what Gendlin called the *Felt Sense*. This Felt Sense emerges from our present, internal, bodily felt experience, often initially very vague and subtle. It may include physical sensations, for example, tight shoulders, or qualities such as coolness or heaviness. There might be images, say a cloud or a bell, and with those images certain atmospheres may be perceived. It may or may not relate to a specific life situation. One may say, our Felt Sense is an expression of our relationship with ourselves and with the world around us.

As the Focuser continues to stay with the Felt Sense, something emerges, perhaps the words that perfectly fit the felt experience. As something comes into focus, an implicit or explicit meaning emerges and with that there might be a feeling of profound relief.

Practically speaking, Focusing is usually done in pairs, with one Focuser, and one listener, also referred to as 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 the Focuser's words, the Focuser, while listening, feels inside, to sense if these words fit the inner experience. This is referred to as 'resonating'. There might be a "yes, but..." While an inner meaning of 'all of this' is gradually emerging, it might already be a bit different than just a moment ago.

2. What are the benefits of Focusing, besides helping the psychotherapy process?

Amona:

The initial realization of how important inner listening is originates from Gendlin's psychotherapy research study, however, optimally something similar to what we practice in Focusing happens many times during an ordinary day. It is a natural happening that has gotten lost for some of us and can be refined to serve us better.

While both the Focuser and Companion offer lots of time, space, and acceptance to what's showing itself, the Focuser often goes from a sense of confusion, maybe heaviness, or tiredness, into a feeling of lightness, relief, or spaciousness. When this happens, it is referred to as a 'body shift'.

The fact that these body shifts typically last past the session is an indication that our relationship to ourselves has changed. Often our relationship to the situation on which we have been Focusing shifts as well. As a result, we often find ourselves unstuck from repetitive emotional and mental spirals, and back into a natural flow.

Also, when you as a Focuser verbally share your experience, you allow yourself to be seen. This is a powerful way of allowing hidden aspects into the light. The Companion, listening with no agenda, and having practiced the art of being present, simply listens, accepts, welcomes, acknowledges, and holds space for everything that arises in the Focuser's experience.

In this kind of shared, deeply welcoming space, the Focuser finds a safe way to get in close contact and develop a friendly relationship with whatever calls for attention.

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, here one of my Focusing experiences:

A while back, I was hugely disappointed when I was not accepted as a contributor for a workshop and was in great emotional turmoil. I also heard something in me say that I was treated unfairly. I felt the tears in my chest welling up, and there was a sense of being small and collapsed.

In a Focusing session, when I fully acknowledged and made contact with its 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, giving it company in a friendly way, asking it what it needed. Suddenly, deep breaths happened spontaneously, ahhh, that's what it was all about. A sense of joy returned spontaneously.

While every Focusing session is very different – this just being one of many examples – there is also something common to all Focusing sessions. It is that any shift of perception that happens in this process can also be felt in the body. We then very consciously take time to stay with the changed Felt Sense, to recognize it, give it space, receive it, and appreciate it, to let it integrate so it may influence our footsteps to come.

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!
I will give you an 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 experience of anxiety is still in us, it has been imprinted, and automatically arises whenever we cross the street. When we learn to notice this inner bodily reaction and everything else that shows itself with it, and as we learn to meet this happening with curiosity, to give it space, maybe ask it what it needs, slowly new possibilities open up, and with that our spontaneous felt experience changes.

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 getting stuck in blaming ourselves or others. It allows us to spontaneously and more easily find solutions to problems.

4. I know you have been a 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 practice?

Amona:

In meditation, you are alone with yourself, in Focusing, in some way you are in relationship with someone else. Also, the process of Focusing is more geared toward 'generating' change. Whatever calls for the Focuser's attention, they begin to interact with it. For example, if the Focuser encounters something difficult or unclear, they will explore their relationship with it, rather than – as done in meditation – just being a witness to it, and letting it be without engaging.

So, the difference between Focusing and meditation is that in the meditation practice we are encouraged to just be present to whatever is as a silent witness, somewhat detached. This, over time, facilitates an inner atmosphere of acceptance of all of life's experiences.

In Focusing, we assume that anything that is arising as a felt experience, thought, or

emotion, that it is calling for our attention, has some kind of message, a gem hidden within, however disturbing it may initially seem. As we very deliberately stay with and relate to what comes, often meaning arises, implicitly or explicitly.

5. Can Focusing and meditation enhance each other?

Amona:

Certainly. Whenever we are unclear about something, an undesired repetition takes place, it might express itself as thoughts, feelings, or actions. Focusing breaks this cycle of repetition. As we attend to what's knocking at the door the Focusing way, something gets unstuck, and space opens for something new.

Therefore, meditation will be more effective, just as psychotherapy becomes more effective when we do learn to feel into ourselves by practicing Focusing. Both in therapy and meditation, many of us tend to get caught in thinking or we might get lost in emotion, or we space out. Focusing allows us to get into the body and to let the Felt Sense, which is much more than just sensation, emerge. This not only helps us to remain anchored in the present moment but also reveals a wholistic meaning.

And, inversely, meditation supports Focusing, because Focusing becomes most effective when we slow down, when we are in a meditative inner state. In meditation, we learn to consciously let the uncomfortable be, to simply stay present to it. We can take this invaluable skill into Focusing.

Being able to identify the Felt Sense is foundational for life. Any experience that we have-- listening to music, attending a party, flying to a new country, interacting with our partner, or interacting at work, goes along with a felt inner experience. By learning to deliberately listen to and refine our perception of this felt experience while finding words that fit it just right, a world of surprising insights and new possibilities opens up.

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 listening to a partner without interpretation or judgment. Both, the Focuser and 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.

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 some. And that's all one needs. From there each will develop their unique ways of Focusing. One can learn Focusing on one's own, but a workshop is a much faster and richer way of

learning. It provides the structure and atmosphere in which to relax and trust, and the mutual feedback and interaction with others are very supportive. Students are supported in curiously staying with difficult, unpleasant experiences long enough to then harvest the 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 very common initial disbeliefs about why this works become replaced with an unmistakable recognition of the benefits.

A student recently said the following about a Focusing workshop:

“Focusing is a process 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.”