

Focusing: A Powerful Technique for Personal Growth

By Susan Lennox, PhD, Certified Focusing Professional

(Previously published in *Healing Times Journal of Holistic Medicine*,
Issue 7, September/October 2001)

What is Focusing?

Focusing is a body-oriented process for self-awareness and emotional healing. It is a step-by-step process for tuning into what is happening inside of us and is a powerful catalyst for personal insight, change and growth.

What are the benefits of Focusing?

Focusing enables us to attain a clear and centered mental state. It powerfully reduces stress and mental “static.” By learning to listen closely to our innermost selves, we are able to discern our most life-affirming paths and overcome the blocks that impede our moving in the direction of our heart’s desires. Focusing helps us to successfully handle overwhelming emotions, release energy-depleting self-criticism and increase our feelings of self-acceptance and inner peace.

Who can learn to Focus?

Anyone can learn to Focus. People of all ages and many cultures use it around the world. Focusing is an innate human ability that can be developed as a skill with just a little bit of instruction and a little bit of practice. It requires no special equipment and can be done either solo or with a partner, who need not be a trained therapist. Like riding a bicycle, once learned, Focusing is a skill that can be used for the rest of one’s life.

How does one Focus?

Generally one starts a Focusing session by “Clearing a Space.” This involves identifying and setting aside the concerns and troubles that are weighing us down right now. Next we turn our attention into our body, especially the area of the stomach, chest and throat, and notice the sensations that are present. Focusers call this sensation the “Felt Sense.” For example, you might notice that there is a churning in your stomach or a constricted feeling in your throat. We acknowledge those sensations in a friendly way and find a word or image that fits the sensation just right. This word or image serves as a “Handle” to hold onto the subtle bodily sensation, which otherwise may tend to dissipate before we are able to learn from it. We can then literally dialogue with the Felt Sense, which is the source of the proverbial “still, small voice” from which flows our inner wisdom. Often when our bodily felt sense knows that it has been heard, you will feel a wonderful sense of release and relaxation come into the place where previously there was tension or constriction. For that reason, even when we Focus on uncomfortable feelings, this release always feels good.

Why does Focusing enable us to make positive changes in our lives?

How many times have you tried to solve a perplexing personal problem with your mind? You dwell on it and think up a dozen different ways that you will do things differently in the future. Yet that self-defeating pattern of behavior or emotion keeps cropping up over and over again. Trying to talk ourselves out of it doesn’t work. Analyzing the problem with our mind doesn’t seem to work either. Why is this? This is because the mind’s expertise is in remembering the

past and planning for the future. However, change can only occur in the present. Change of a deep and lasting nature can happen only in the body and only in the now. Focusing is a clear pathway into the body and into the now, where life-affirming change can happen.

If Focusing is an innate human capacity, why do we need to learn it?

In a quieter, simpler time of human existence, people were more able to easily tune into and be guided by their inner wisdom. But because that small inner voice speaks softly, it gets drowned out in the roar of contemporary life. Because it speaks slowly, it needs our patience in order to be heard. When we have “no time” to give it attention in our hectic lives, we lose access to the wisdom it is designed to share. Focusing is a way to get back in touch with this wonderful inner resource we all have.

How was Focusing discovered?

During the early 1960's, Dr. Eugene Gendlin, a brilliant philosopher/psychologist at the University of Chicago, and Carl Rogers, the renowned humanist psychologist, researched the question of why some people succeed in therapy while others fail. From intensive analysis of hundreds of therapy sessions, they found that the people who reached successful outcomes were those who naturally attended closely to the “felt sense” in their bodies as they worked in therapy.

The power of this inner attention was so great that the researchers could actually predict who would succeed based on their behavior during their very first two therapy sessions! The people who succeeded were those who slowed down their speech, paid close attention to their vague inner bodily sensations, and took the time to let the meaning of those sensations emerge. In contrast, the people who stayed “in their heads” analyzing their problems or who merely recalled and reexperienced certain emotions without tapping into their direct bodily experience did not succeed in therapy. Based on these observations, Dr. Gendlin developed a system for teaching people how to do what the successful therapy clients did and called this process Focusing.

How can I learn more about Focusing?

The best way to learn Focusing is from a Professional certified by the Focusing Institute. Focusing can be taught in a one-to-one or group setting. There are many Certified Focusing Professionals in this area who would be pleased to teach you how to Focus. For more information about Focusing, including an extensive list of Professionals all over the world, you can visit the Focusing Institute's website at www.focusing.org. To learn more about the theory and practice of Focusing, you also may wish to read Dr. Gendlin's original book entitled Focusing (Bantam Books, 1978) available in inexpensive paperback version from most book sellers. Another excellent book from which to learn Focusing is The Power of Focusing by Ann Weiser Cornell (New Harbinger Publications, 1996).

Susan Lennox is a Certified Focusing Professional and Transformative Change Coach living in the Greater Boston area. She provides coaching and focusing training by telephone and in person and can be reached at slennox1@juno.com or 781-721-6698.