

▲▲▲ THE POWER OF ▲▲ FOCUSING

*A Practical Guide to
Emotional Self-Healing*

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Chapter One

What is Focusing?

Whenever Jenny needed to speak up about herself, she got a choking sensation in her throat. The more important the situation was to her, the stronger she felt the choking. Job interviews and class presentations were painful, nearly impossible. She had been to many therapists and tried many techniques to try to get rid of this choking sensation, without results. She diagnosed herself as “self-defeating, masochistic, always sabotaging myself.”

Then Jenny heard about Focusing. She heard that Focusing is a way of listening to your body with compassion, without assumptions. She heard that many people experience profound and lasting change from this kind of inner listening. She was doubtful. It sounded too simple! But she was willing to give it a try, because she was desperate for something to work.

One thing that intrigued Jenny was that Focusing is a skill, not a therapeutic technique. Although many therapists incorporate Focusing in their work, Jenny would be able to learn Focusing without going to a therapist. She liked the idea of learning a skill that she would be able to use, not only for the choking sensation but for any issue in her life, on her own, without needing to pay someone.

When Jenny came in for her Focusing lesson and told me her situation, I had a strong feeling that Focusing could help her. I’ve taught Focusing to many hundreds of people over the years, and Jenny’s circumstance was classic. Her body was already speaking to her. She just needed to learn how to hear its message.

I asked Jenny if she was feeling the choking at that very moment.

“Yes. I can feel it. It’s here now because I’m learning a new technique with you, and I feel I have to do well.”

I asked her to describe what it felt like. She looked a little surprised, and said, “Choking, of course!” I asked her to go back to the sensation and check the word “choking” to make sure that word was the right word for how it felt.

She looked thoughtful. “Actually,” she said slowly, “it’s more like a hand squeezing.”

Now Jenny’s eyes were closed and she was concentrating inwardly. I asked her to gently say hello to the hand squeezing sensation. “Just say to it, ‘Yes, I know you’re there.’”

This was a completely new attitude for her. “I’ve never sort of looked it in the eye before; I’ve just tried to get rid of it.” So this new attitude took a while to find, but when she did, there was a definite sense of bodily relief: “It’s still there, but it’s not painful anymore. It’s almost like, now that it has my attention, it doesn’t need to hurt me.”

Then I asked Jenny to imagine that she was sitting down with the sensation as she would sit with a friend, compassionate and curious about how the friend was feeling.

Jenny was silent for several minutes, eyes closed, sensing. Then her eyes opened in astonishment. “Wow. I never dreamed it would say something like that. That’s really amazing.”

I waited, knowing that she would tell me the rest in her own time.

In a moment she spoke again. “It says . . . it says it cares about me! It says it’s just trying to keep me from making mistakes!”

“And how does it feel now?” I asked.

“The choking or squeezing is completely gone. My throat feels open and relaxed. There’s a good warm feeling spreading all through my body. This is really amazing. I never thought it would change like this!”

What is Focusing?

Focusing is a body-oriented process of self-awareness and emotional healing. It’s as simple as noticing how you feel—and then having a conversation with your feelings in which *you* do most of the listening. Focusing starts with the familiar experience of feeling

something in your body that is about what is going on in your life. When you feel jittery in your stomach as you stand up to speak, or when you feel tightness in your chest as you anticipate making a crucial phone call, you are experiencing what we call a “felt sense”—a body sensation that is meaningful.

So what do you do when you have a jittery feeling or a tightness or a choking sensation in your throat? If you’re like most of us, you try to get rid of it. Maybe you curse it a little: “Why does this stupid feeling have to come now, just when I need to be my best?” Or maybe you put yourself down: “If I were a better person, I wouldn’t freeze up this way.” Maybe you do deep breathing exercises, or have a drink or a cigarette.

What doesn’t occur to you, unless you know Focusing, is to listen to the feeling, to let *it* speak to *you*.

And yet, when you let the feeling speak to you, you are allowing yourself to be open to the depth and richness of your whole self. Furthermore, when you listen to the feeling, it is much more likely to relax, release, and let you go on with what you’re doing in a clear and centered way. You might even move forward in this area of your life in ways that surprise and delight you.

Focusing is the process of listening to your body in a gentle, accepting way and hearing the messages that your inner self is sending you. It’s a process of honoring the wisdom that you have inside you, becoming aware of the subtle level of knowing that speaks to you through your body.

The results of listening to your body are insight, physical release, and positive life change. You understand yourself better, you feel better, *and* you act in ways that are more likely to create the life you want.

The discovery of Focusing

In the early 1960s, Professor Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago began research into the question: “Why is psychotherapy helpful for some people, but not others?” He and his colleagues studied tapes of hundreds of therapy sessions. They taped the entire course of therapy, from the first session to the last, with many different therapists and clients. Then they asked both the therapists and the clients to rate whether the therapy had been successful, and

they also used psychological tests to determine if there had been positive change. If all three agreed—therapist, client, and independent test—then that course of therapy was used in the study. The result was two groups of tapes: successful versus unsuccessful psychotherapy.

The researchers then compared the tapes to see if they could determine what made the difference between success and failure. They first listened to the therapists on the tapes. Common sense suggested that there would be something about the therapist's behavior that would determine whether therapy was successful or not. Surely the therapists in the successful therapy were somehow more empathic, or more genuine, or more accepting, or more brilliant. . . . But in fact there was *no significant difference* in therapist behavior. In both sets of tapes, the therapists were essentially the same. The therapists were doing their best—and some clients were getting better, while others were not.

Then the researchers listened to the clients on the tapes, and that is when they made a fascinating and important discovery: there *was* a difference between the successful therapy clients and the unsuccessful ones. And it was a difference that could be heard in the first or second session—in the *clients*. Whatever this was, it wasn't something that the successful clients learned how to do because of the therapy; it was something they were already doing, able to do, when they walked in the door.

Gendlin and the other researchers found, to their surprise, that they could predict success in therapy by listening to the tapes of anyone's first two therapy sessions. Listening to the client, they could actually tell whether or not the therapy would be ultimately successful!

So what was this? What was it that the researchers could hear on the tapes, that allowed them to predict whether the therapy would be successful?

What they heard was this: at some point in the session, the successful therapy clients would *slow down* their talk, become *less articulate*, and begin to *grope for words* to describe something that they were feeling at that moment. If you listened to the tapes, you would hear something like this: "Hmmm. How would I describe this? It's right *here*. It's . . . uh . . . it's . . . it's not exactly anger . . . hmmm." Often the clients would mention that they experienced this feeling

in their bodies, saying things like, "It's right here in my chest," or "I have this funny feeling in my stomach."

So the successful therapy clients had a vague, hard-to-describe body awareness that they were directly sensing during the session. By contrast, the unsuccessful therapy clients stayed articulate through the whole session! They stayed "up in their heads." They didn't sense in their bodies, and they never directly felt something that at first was hard to describe. No matter how much they analyzed their problems, or explained them, or thought about them, or cried about them, their therapy was ultimately unsuccessful.

Eugene Gendlin determined to find out how to teach the skill that made all the difference between successful and unsuccessful therapy. As a therapist himself, he didn't want to merely sit back and watch as some of his clients got better and others did not. He wanted to help everyone.

Gendlin did find a way to teach this powerful and effective skill of emotional healing, and he called it "Focusing." At first he thought Focusing would only be useful to improve psychotherapy. But then people started asking him to teach them Focusing for other purposes: as a self-help skill to use instead of therapy, to make decisions, to help with creative projects. In 1978 he published a book called *Focusing* which sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The interest in Focusing was so great that Gendlin started offering workshops and started the Focusing Institute to support the growing worldwide network of people using Focusing. (See the "Resources" section at the back of this book for more information about how you can connect with this network.)

Focusing is a natural skill that was discovered, not invented. It was discovered by looking at what people are doing when they are changing successfully. Focusing ability is the birthright of every person: we were all born with the ability to know how we feel from moment to moment. But for most of us, the experiences of hurt and alienation in our childhood and from our culture have caused us to lose trust in our bodies and our feelings. We need to re-learn Focusing.

Who benefits from Focusing?

Focusing is a very broad-purpose skill. It isn't intended for one single purpose, but for many. The wonderful thing is that you can learn Focusing and then use it whenever you need it for the rest of

your life. Jenny's story, told at the beginning of the book, is an example of how to use Focusing to understand and change an intrusive body signal, such as a choking sensation. Here are some of the other ways you might benefit from Focusing.

If you feel stuck in your therapy

Often people who are in psychotherapy but feel stuck decide to learn Focusing in order to get their therapy moving again. They feel their therapy progressed for a while, but then bogged down somehow. "I keep saying the same things, getting the same insights," one woman reported. "I know there's something I'm not getting to, but I don't know what."

Some therapists incorporate Focusing techniques in their therapy. Others recommend their clients learn Focusing and practice it between sessions. If you're in therapy now and you would like your therapist to use Focusing, see Chapter Eleven, "If You're in Therapy."

If you'd like to know better what you feel and want

Many people are not in touch with their feelings and their wants. Often men are trained to ignore and set aside feelings, especially "weaker" and more tender feelings like fear and sadness. "People ask me how I feel and I draw a blank. It's like there's nothing there." Often women are trained to defer to others, to set their own feelings aside and put others' feelings first. As a consequence, we don't even know what we feel and want. We're cut off from our bodies, from the source of knowing how we feel. Focusing brings us back into our bodies and back into contact with what is real for us, our feelings, wants, and needs.

If you'd like a way to handle overwhelming emotions

Strong feelings like sadness, fear, or anger can sometimes feel overwhelming. They can wash over us like ocean waves, shake us like a windstorm, and we can feel helpless next to their power. But these emotions are strong for a reason. They have an important story

to tell; they are bringing back an important piece of our wholeness. Focusing lets you hear the story and receive the gifts from these strong emotions without getting overwhelmed. With Focusing you learn how to have a comfortable relationship with strong feelings, how to acknowledge them and listen to them, instead of being drowned by them.

If you'd like to release action blocks or addictions

An action block is any place in your life where you want to do something but you don't. The most common action blocks are organization blocks (like never getting your desk organized), and writer's block. Procrastination is the all-purpose block. If you can fill in the blank in this sentence: "I want to ____, but I don't," then you have an action block.

Addictions work like action blocks in reverse. With an addiction, the sentence is, "I want to stop ____, but I don't."

Focusing helps you release action blocks or addictions by enabling you to listen compassionately to the part of you that is responsible for the block or addiction, and gain its cooperation.

If you'd like to release self-criticism and increase self-love and acceptance

"You've failed again. You'll always fail. You might as well give up now."

"There's something profoundly wrong with you. You're flawed in a way that can never be fixed."

"You're weird. You'd better not let anyone see how weird you are—they won't want to be friends with you."

Who is saying these terrible things to you? If you're like most of us, you say them to yourself. We are typically more harsh and cruel to ourselves than we are to anyone else. Focusing has powerful tools for releasing you from self-criticism and other forms of inner sabotage. You'll learn to turn your inner Critic into an ally and supporter, and you'll grow in love and acceptance for all parts of yourself. This self-acceptance in turn allows deeper and faster change in the areas of your life that need to change.

*If you'd like to make clear
and centered decisions*

Everyone needs to make decisions, every day. Some are small, such as “What shall I have for dinner?” Some are large, such as “What will I do with the rest of my life?” If decision making isn't easy for you, every day can be a minefield. Confusion, self-doubt, and anxiety are a few of the companions of a difficult decision-making process.

“I want to learn Focusing,” one man told me, “because I realize that my decision-making always falls back on what I *should* do, according to other people, or society. And I don't want that.”

The classical way of making a decision is to draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper and list all the “pros” on one side, all the “cons” on the other. Have you ever done that and found yourself at the end as undecided as ever? The difficulty is that this is a purely logical way of decision-making, and logic uses only one part of us. We need to make decisions, especially important ones, from our whole self. Focusing is a great tool for decision making because it helps you sense the rightness of the choice you are making, at a level beyond logical analysis. You will be able to make a choice that is right for you holistically, that is, taking in and integrating all factors at once.

The wisdom of the body

It is becoming common knowledge that we can consult our bodies about what is right for us to eat and how much exercise we need. Many people now understand that our bodies “know” what good health is, and that our bodies can show us how to find our way to optimum physical health if we so desire. But to see the scope of the body's wisdom as only physical is to take much too narrow a view. There is much more.

The truth is that our bodies are wise in many ways hardly ever acknowledged by our culture. Our bodies carry knowledge about how we are living our lives, about what we need to be more fully ourselves, about what we value and believe, about what has hurt us emotionally and how to heal it. Our bodies know which people around us are the ones who bring out the best in us, and which

people deplete and diminish us. Our bodies know what is the right next step to bring us to more fulfilling and rewarding lives.

Our minds alone do not know these things. Our minds can remember the past, repeat what others have told us, and invent any number of possible futures to be either wishful or anxious about. But the past and the future, the primary domains of the mind, are not the place where change can happen. Change happens in the present. The gift of the body is that it is always in present time, always *here*. To move into the part of you that has the power to transform your life, all you need to do is to bring your awareness to your body.

Focusing is the way in to this vast realm of knowledge and this exciting potential for change. Focusing lets you form a trusting relationship with your body so that you can begin to hear the wisdom of this vast part of yourself that is accessible through body awareness. Focusing lets you listen to the whispers of your body before it has to shout. Focusing is the key to changing your life in a way that satisfies your inner sense of rightness.

In the next chapter, we'd like to give you a “tour” of the Focusing process, so you'll get an impression of what it's like to do Focusing. In Chapter Three, we'll set the stage for your own Focusing by showing you how to create the inner climate that's needed. In Chapter Four and Five, we'll show you exactly how to do Focusing yourself. In Chapter Six, we show you how to receive the gifts—the positive feelings—that result from Focusing. Chapter Seven contains a number of stories about people using Focusing for particular purposes, like making decisions, or handling overwhelming feelings. In Chapter Eight, we'll do “troubleshooting,” and help you with some of the most typical problems and questions. Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven are about Focusing with a friend, with your clients if you're a therapist, and with your therapist if you're a therapy client.