

How do we help clients unfold their ‘felt sense’ or Focus?



Focusing teaches a way of being with ourselves. It helps you make contact with yourself with a special kind of bodily awareness and honours your intuitive wisdom. The implicit expands to the explicit. We learn to ‘make friends’ with or say ‘hello’ to whatever comes in a non-critical way or, as Gendlin says, to be with them in a gentle, friendly way (and even to say hello to any part of us that does not want us to be gentle or friendly, to hear that too).

The practice of Focusing invites us to hold a gentle, nonjudgmental curiosity toward what we find and what we need to listen to. This acknowledging and allowing whatever comes and wants our awareness, makes focusing powerful. It allows us, (our mind and body), to know more than what we thought. It enables us to know what the crux of the issue is and what next step to take. And the process is our own. When we learn to focus, we become the experts in our own lives, which is both empowering and liberating.

We can either teach clients Gendlin’s six-step process or we can do mini focusing moments within a therapy session as suggested by Leijssen (in Greenberg 1998, Ch 6; Elliot et al 2014 p 182). Some clients do it naturally, so we just have to stay with them as they do it. It may be helpful if the therapist knows focusing.

In brief, Gendlin’s original “six-step Focusing” (1978) protocol includes:

1. Clearing a space
2. Getting a felt sense
3. Finding a handle
4. Resonating the handle
5. Asking and
6. Receiving.

Here is more detail on the six steps:

- Bring awareness to your body – Clear a space.
- Sense or invite what wants your awareness now. Wait until something comes (a physical sensation, image, word, metaphor)
- Begin to describe something (and checking with the description with it)
- Acknowledge it and say ‘hello’
- Settle down with and keep it company in a friendly, gentle, curious way
- Sense for its point of view (or asking it what it needs or wants)
- Let it know you hear it
- See/feel if there is a shift
- Ask it what is the next step
- Sense for a stopping place
- Receive and experience what has changed
- Let it know you can come back
- Thank the felt sense for bringing awareness (Weiser Cornell 2013, pp 82-111)

All the Focusing writers I know stay with Gendlin’s original steps and add their own flavour, even Greenberg. They all agree it can help. Gendlin is OK with this as Focusing is not an invention of Gendlin’s. It is what Gendlin noticed people that do well in therapy do. All he wanted to do was to help people do something that would help them help themselves to their own “implicit knowing” so they could unfold their own way forward. This is why he came up with the steps as a guide. I love it because it is not about my interpretations as a therapist. It is about the person’s own way forward. It never ceases to amaze me when people are in a focusing process what their body unfolds. The beauty is it is the client’s own process and uniquely meaningful to them. At no time does Gendlin (or I) suggest that Focusing is the only thing to do or that it is superior. Gendlin says it can be “combined with every other useful avenue of therapy” (1991 p 255-279, Weiser Cornell, 2013, p xxxiv).