

Understanding and Resolving Difficult Emotions

Using *Focusing* to be Present with Yourself

October 2008

In his book *Focusing*, Eugene Gendlin tells a story about Peggy, a woman in her late twenties. Her husband John is a bank executive and Peggy works part-time so that she can care for their five-year-old son.

Gendlin recounts the following incident: "One evening, John came home jubilant. The bank president had told him that the bank had some expansion plans and that John was a key in those plans. In his excitement John knocked a dish off the kitchen table and broke it. It was her best china. Peggy flew into a sudden rage, ran upstairs in tears, and refused to cook dinner. She was surprised and upset by her own outburst.

"She sat in the bedroom and tried to patch herself up inside, using all those familiar approaches that we use and that seldom work. At first she tried to dismiss the problem as 'trivial', as though hoping she could belittle it out of existence. 'So he broke an expensive dish,' she told herself angrily. 'Am I so dumb that I can be upset by *that*? That dish isn't all that important in my life.'

"That didn't work. The upset feeling refused to let itself be thought to extinction. Peggy next tried figuring it out. 'Well, I've been under a lot of strain the past few days,' she told herself. 'I let the school work pile up on me. Haven't had enough sleep. No wonder I'm edgy.' No results. What Peggy told herself may have been true, but nothing changed

inside. The angry, irritated feeling stayed right where it was."

Sound familiar? We've all had a feeling we cannot understand, and which does not seem to make any sense. Whether the feeling is one of rage or something else (like a nagging worry, a simmering resentment, a lingering dread), emotions can sometimes leave us feeling as if we are not in control of ourselves or our lives. We are often advised to learn emotional *management* techniques without being taught how to *understand* emotions and their benefit to us. As a result, we find ourselves spending a lot of time and effort *controlling* how we feel. Yet, like Peggy, in spite of those efforts, we may not *feel* any better.

Emotion as the Enemy

How do you respond to your own difficult emotions? Difficult emotions can be overwhelming, and many of us find ourselves dealing with them in common ways; escaping or drowning in them. No matter which one we are most familiar with, more often than not, one tactic tends to follow the other in our search for relief from troublesome feelings.

1) **Escaping Feelings:**

Always keeping busy – never stopping long enough to check how we feel.

Rising above it – "I'm not going to let this get to me."

Denying, minimizing, or ignoring that we are feeling anything at all.

Analyzing the situation – keeps us from feeling the physical discomfort of the emotion.

Disengaging – from ourselves and others to avoid exposing ourselves to emotional upset.

2) **Drowning in Feelings:**

Stuffing – swallowing emotion, blaming self, sinking into misery, pessimism and self-criticism, eating to stuff, using alcohol or other addictive behaviours to silence emotion.

Venting – "spewing" emotion onto others by getting snappy, whining and complaining, blaming, venting anxiety and worry, crying, becoming aggressive or violent.

While we may experience temporary relief from an upsetting feeling using one of the above responses, in the long run they rob us of the opportunity to get valuable information from the very emotions we are trying to avoid. There must be another way!

Focusing

The process of Focusing was outlined by Eugene Gendlin, out of research into the question "Why is psychotherapy helpful for some people, but not others?" From observing success in therapy, the six Focusing steps were outlined as a means to teach us how to interact with our own emotions. Because this process allows us to bring an unclear, vague, inner body "felt sense" of a problem or situation into clearer focus, Gendlin named it Focusing.

What is a "Felt Sense"?

To understand what happens in Focusing we need to know what is meant by the term "felt sense". Felt senses include our *whole* response to a situation. A felt sense is an internal, vague, physical sensation that has meaning attached to it. It is different from, let's say, a hunger pang. Felt senses are not simply emotions either – they encompass four components:

- Physical sensation: "a choking feeling in my throat"
- Visual image or symbol: "like a marble stuck in there"
- Emotional quality: "kind of like fear"
- Real-life connection: "what I need to tell my mother"

Focusing provides the method to connect with, and listen to a felt sense, giving us access to our own internal wisdom. Without this connection, we can feel like travelers lost at sea, without a compass.

The Six Step Process

To demonstrate the process of Focusing, let us return to Peggy. After the usual approaches failed to help her feel better, Peggy turned to Focusing. In order to listen to herself, Peggy first had to adopt an attitude of curiosity and acceptance for whatever she might discover. Suspending judgment and mustering as much compassion for herself as she could, she proceeded with the first step:

- 1) Clearing a space:** As she paid attention to her body, Peggy asked herself "What's between me and feeling just fine right now?" As issues and sensations surfaced she noticed each and set them some distance away from herself.
- 2) Finding the Felt Sense:** Among the sensations that surfaced,

Peggy asked herself which one was most pressing or needed her attention most right now. She allowed her body to decide this for her and it settled on the fuss about the broken dish.

- 3) Finding a "Handle":** Peggy tried to sense the "whole thing" of it and to allow a description (word or phrase) to surface that would capture the crux of her discomfort. She arrived at "anger" – not about the dish, but at John's confidence in his own future.
- 4) Resonating:** Checking out the "handle" she received, Peggy let her attention flow back and forth between the description and the felt sense in her body, waiting for a shift or movement to confirm that she was getting the message. As she did so, some discomfort remained and after waiting for the *whole feel of it to emerge*, she got the word "jealously."
- 5) Asking:** Hanging on to "jealousy", Peggy could delve a bit deeper by asking some clarifying questions, like "what is this jealousy all about?" What came to her was a large shift in the felt sense – like a release – and sense of "feeling left behind."
- 6) Receiving and Ending:** Rather than returning to a judgmental or critical state, it was important for Peggy to simply hear and accept this new information about the conflict between being a mom and having a career.

Is That It?

Yes, that's it! More or less. Rather than escaping or drowning in the anger she felt, Peggy was able to use the Focusing process to help her *be present with her feelings*. By paying attention and *allowing her whole*

response to an insignificant occurrence, she was able to learn new information about the state of her life. Using her inner experience as her compass, she can go further with deciding how to address the problem.

Resources:

- Davis, Robbins Eshelman, & McKay. 2008. *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*, 6th ed. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Gendlin, E. 1981. *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Weiser Cornell, A. 2005. An Invitation to Presence: Focusing Helps Clients Embrace Their Most Feared Emotions. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 6, 56-61.
- Weiser Cornell, A. 1996. *The Power of Focusing: A Practical Guide to Emotional Self Healing*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

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The Regional Health Authority EAP is a one program, multi-site model. EAP offices are located at the following sites:

Employee Assistance Centre
599 Empress Street
Winnipeg, MB R3G 3P3

Health Sciences Centre
Room NA 510
700 McDermot Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3E 0T2

St. Boniface General Hospital
Room N5052, 431 Tache Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R2H 3C3

Rural EAP site locations may be identified by contacting the Employee Assistance Centre.

To initiate services, please call:
(204) 786-8880 • TTY (204) 775-0586
• Toll Free 1-800-590-5553

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ARTICLE CORRECTION AND APOLOGY: There were parts of two sentences missing in the July 2008 EAP Updater "Fit for Work". The last two sentences of paragraph one should read as follows, "*The American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association recommend all healthy adults aged 18-65 years need moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes, five days each week or vigorous intensity aerobic activity for a minimum of 20 minutes, three days each week. Moderate intensity aerobic activity is generally equivalent to a brisk walk. Vigorous activity is exemplified by anything that causes rapid breathing and a substantial increase in heart rate (e.g. jogging).*" Sincere apologies to the author and our readers for the error.

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