

Accessing Experience II (Experiential Focusing)

1. Experiential Focusing (EF) was developed by Gene Gendlin (1962, 1981) at the University of Chicago for working with unclear feelings, what he called a *felt-sense*.
2. The *Felt-Sense* (F-S) is a vague feeling of unease or unclarity, and is defined as a “bodily grounded, emotionally colored inner sense about something that can be symbolized and points toward action.”
3. EF integrates smoothly with other experiential methods or can function as a stand alone technique. There are several component steps which can be used independently, at appropriate moments within other tasks. In addition, you can branch easily from a focusing sequence into other experiential tasks.
4. EF is particularly useful early in the process of working with participants, and when what is needed is a gentle beginning and introduction to experiential work.
5. Incorporated into EF are many of the basic experiential concepts we already apply. When looked at closely you will see that EF covers almost the entire *cycle of floorwork* with which we are already familiar.
6. Gendlin stipulated that focusing is not so much a technique as it is an attitude of inward-directed attention. This allows the participant to temporarily set aside expectations about thoughts, feelings, or reasons in favor of a kind of waiting and remaining quietly present with the not yet speakable and receptive to the not yet formed. It is kind of like meditation or mindfulness, but the mind is not empty as it directed toward a specific object or thing; it is always about something, an issue, a person, an emotion or feeling, an experience.
7. Like all other therapeutic approaches, it requires a safe environment for participants to be able to tolerate the ambiguity and perceived lack of cognitive control. This is achieved by adopting the empathic stance in which you listen carefully to every bit of information, and track the participant’s immediate experiencing of unclear feeling as it shifts and evolves. The focusing attitude is one of curiosity, openness, caring, tolerance, and understanding.
8. Focusing helps participants access and explore the various aspects of their emotion schemes (see the separate handout). The F-S or unclear feeling which forms the basic first steps in the focusing method is similar to what we call an “implicit emotion scheme.” Focusing is a useful way to explore and symbolize these emotion schemes in the form of unclear feelings.
9. Focusing and an emotion scheme both involve an event or situation that is perceived as relevant to the self, bodily sensations, imagery or symbolism, an emotional quality, and a desired direction or tendency to fulfill one’s needs or wants.

10. If the participant feels safe and is ready to enter the experience you will guide him/her through a series of steps a little bit at a time, slowly, deliberately, and gently. It is vital that you are “present” with the participant, and that you enter his/her world by maintaining contact with your own felt-sense of what the participant is experiencing, a kind of parallel process.
11. **Stage 1: Marker**
 - a. Prior to focusing proper one often begins with the *clearing a space* method (see previous handout on CAS technique), however there are many times this is not necessary. It all depends on where the participant is, what and how it is presented, and on how comfortable the participant is with internal work.
 - b. Classic marker is an unclear feeling, a vague sense that something is not right, or “out of kilter” or “off” in some way that the participant cannot put his/her finger on. There is often a troubling feeling or foreboding, a sense of discomfort about something or someone that nags or “eats away” in the back of the mind.
 - c. There are three identifying features to the classic unclear feeling: (1) reference is made to particular internal experience, (2) there is difficulty in articulating or symbolizing the experience, and (3) there is some expressed distress or disturbance in connection with the experience (i.e., “I don’t quite know what I’m feeling aboutSomething is not right....I can’t put my finger on it....I’m upset but don’t know why...I’m having trouble putting it into words.”)
 - d. Sometimes the participant will present with an alternate form of an unclear feeling by way of intellectualizing or externalizing, talking in circles without getting to what is important. You can interrupt gently by saying, “I wonder as you’re talking what you are experiencing,” and suggest if you can try something here. Then, get them to slow down, close their eyes (if not already) or look at a point on the wall or ceiling if they have trouble closing their eyes, and look inside to the part where things are felt.
12. **Stage 2: Attending to the Unclear Feeling**
 - a. You now move from *clearing a space* into *focusing* proper by identifying an important unclear feeling. You can ask, “Which of these things seems to be the main thing that is bothering me... Which is the most important one....See what comes to you and don’t force it.”
 - b. Now help them take it out of wherever you put it (i.e., the corner or up on a shelf) during *clearing a space*, and imagine it sitting in the middle of that space (sometimes like in a box or carton). Ask them, “Can you look at it, sitting there?”
 - c. Encourage an attitude of receptive waiting and invite the participant to turn their attention inward to what is troubling or unclear (the felt-sense). Make use of process advisement, experiential questions, and silence

13. **Stage 3: Searching for and Checking Potential Descriptors**

- a. Once attention is on the unclear inner feeling, ask if they can find a word, phrase, image or metaphor for the F-S. These descriptors are called “handles,” and are only symbolic representations for the F-S (remember, “The map is not the territory”), and not the real experience. What they are feeling in their body *is* the real thing, the F-S.
- b. Tell them to be patient and to wait for the “handle” to come “naturally” to them from the experience itself, and just continue to focus only on the F-S, the bodily experience. Then, reflect back exactly what you hear them tell you.
- c. Encourage them to compare the label, phrase, image, or metaphor (handle) to the unclear feeling, the F-S, to see if the description they picked accurately fits it. This back and forth process is known as *Resonating*. Many times it generates a larger list of potential descriptors which can then be checked and revised over several speaking turns.
- d. *Resonating* can be phrased as follows, “So check that, see if that fits the sense, the feeling....Does that seem accurate....What fits better....It’s not quite _____, is it something else....Does that fit it now?”
- e. If a participant is really stuck and you have a strong intuition of what might fit, you can offer a potential descriptor, but be certain the participant is the final judge.

14. **Stage 4: Feeling Shift (Partial Resolution)**

- a. Sometimes the discovery of the handle leads to a feeling shift in the inner experience called a *Felt-Shift*, revealed by a smile, a sigh of relief, a physical easing, a tension release, an internal sense of freedom or satisfaction, or perhaps a feeling of completeness.
- b. Often, the handle itself does not lead to a *felt-shift*. You can help the participant discover what is there, beneath the surface, by asking a series of questions aimed at the feeling in the body. In other words you ask the F-S itself, not the brain so to speak, for help in answering the questions. These questions can be like worded the following, “What is this thing, [X], all about....What is so X about this....What is the most important quality in this feeling...What does it feel like....What is the crux or worst of it....What does it need or want....What would it need to move forward in some way....What would it feel like if it were resolved?”
- c. When a shift occurs look for tension release, often the deep sigh. However, it is not clear a shift has occurred until you have explored it together. Sometimes you’ll see a stronger voice emerge, or even a protesting voice indicating a shift.

15. **Stage 5: Receiving (Midlevel resolution)**

- a. When a feeling shift occurs, a critical voice often emerges. It is important to help the participant protect the new experience from the inner critic by empathizing with and accepting the new experience. You can suggest that the participant set aside the critical voice and stay with the new feeling; this is called *Receiving*.
- b. Ask the participant if he/she can accept (receive) the gift that his/her deeper self has given. If not, what is getting in the way, or could he/she accept at least part of the gift. If he/she can accept the gift let him relish and enjoy it. Encourage his/her sense of success in realizing whatever connection has been made
- c. At this point as sometimes earlier, a further puzzle is revealed which may lead back to another round of EF, or it may lead to the final step.

16. Stage 6: Carrying Forward (Full Resolution)

- a. Here the participant begins to explore wider connections and related issues, preparing to take new action. This can be new within-session tasks, such as, two-chair dialogue for conflict splits. Carrying forward may also mean expanding and extending the feeling shift to the outside—a kind of anchoring as in the cycle of floorwork.
 - b. Again, be encouraging and help the participant look for creative way to express their new awareness.
17. There are several common difficulties in EF. First, be careful not to become too technique focused at the expense of the relationship, and watch for too much jargon. Second, a number of participants may see their bodies negatively or are used to ignoring them, and not see the value in emphasizing bodily feeling; they may even be frightened by such feelings. Three, as with any technique, it can be used to avoid real contact or to avoid dealing with the participant's experience of the relationship. Four, be careful not to mislead the participant into thinking that E-F is easier than it actually is. While focusing is natural for some, others may find it strange, difficult, or uncomfortable.