

Life wants to live:

focusing-oriented coaching

Coach **Báirbre Meehan** explores the deep synergy between coaching and the body-oriented practice of focusing, and offers a practical guide to coaching with a focusing approach

As a practising coach, reading Eugene Gendlin's seminal 1978 book *Focusing*¹ marked a significant turning point in my personal and professional life. I was intrigued by the focusing process, and by how natural it feels in the body. Over time and with practice, I discovered that the process of change actually feels good, in contrast with my well-worn paths of intellectual analysing, reliving old emotions or avoiding feelings altogether.

Focusing is the inner compass with which I navigate my life and my relationships, allowing me to live from a place that is deeper and truer than just my thoughts and feelings. Focusing has taught me self-compassion – to listen to myself more deeply, to trust what my body offers and to honour each and all of the parts of myself.

As focusing naturally flowed into my coaching work, I unwittingly role-modelled the focusing presence for my clients. Enthused by the call-and-response of this way of working, I learned to walk the fine line between supporting clients to connect inwardly, and trusting that their body knows the right next step. Coaching in a focusing-oriented way is about being fully present to your client as they get in touch with and acknowledge parts of themselves that may not be possible for them to get in touch with alone. As clients develop

“

Focusing is a natural, forward-moving process of awareness; a series of steps that allow us to connect with our felt experience of what is happening, in the present moment, in relation to situations in our life

the capacity to create a space in which to connect with the felt sense of their coaching agenda, I am constantly reminded what it really means to be human and to simply be... one human being with another.

The origins of focusing

In the 1950s, US psychologist Carl Rogers was revolutionising psychotherapy with his 'person-centred' approach and leading a mammoth study at the University of Chicago to assess the correlation between the therapist core conditions (empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard) and successful therapeutic outcomes. At the same time, philosophy student Eugene Gendlin was passionately pursuing the question '*How do we symbolise our experience?*'. In Rogers' study, Gendlin saw an opportunity to deepen his understanding of this question by directly observing numerous clients, and so he joined Rogers, who trained him in 'non-directive' therapy.²

The research results were surprising in that they did not conclude, as expected, that the therapist conditions led to higher processing levels in the client, which in turn led to successful therapeutic outcomes. Instead, the results showed that some clients have a pre-existing capacity for accessing and 'checking-back' into their bodily-felt experience. Results

were so conclusive that psychotherapy students listening to recordings of clients' first two therapy sessions could correctly identify those clients who would have a successful therapeutic outcome, by simply observing the presence or absence of clients' bodily-felt experiencing capacity.

Focusing is a skill that comes naturally to some of us but is teachable to everyone. Gendlin did not *create* the focusing process; he observed it taking place naturally and bolstered by these research outcomes, he went on to publish his 1978 book *Focusing*¹ which laid out a step-by-step guide to accessing and working, with the bodily-felt experience to create forward-moving life changes.

What is focusing?

Focusing is a natural, forward-moving *process of awareness*; a series of steps that allow us to connect with our felt experience of what is happening, in the present moment, in relation to situations in our life. We each have within us the capacity to create a space from which we can connect with our felt sense of a given situation, helping us understand much more about the complexities of what is happening in our lives, and in doing so, deepen our understanding of ourselves.

Focusing centres around two key elements: *focusing presence* and *felt sense*.

A 'focusing presence' is a kind of inward attention that enables a felt sense to form, and that allows us to stay connected with the felt sense through the many unfolding change steps of the focusing process. The focusing presence can be explained using the analogy of creating a climate where things can grow, like plants growing in a greenhouse in winter. Much as the greenhouse protects the plants from the harsh elements of frost, strong winds and heavy rain, the focusing presence creates a safe space for our inner experience, protected from the harsh internal elements of self-doubt, judgment, dismissal and self-criticism.

Although the term 'felt sense' was first coined by Gendlin, the felt sense itself has existed for as long as we have. We experience felt senses often in our lives, whether or not we are aware of or connected to them. Think of:

- a piercing pain in your heart, following the death of a loved one;
- a swelling in your chest of warm expansive aliveness, as you breathe in the sensuous aroma of wild flowers on a spring morning;
- a black pounding gripping dread in your chest as you catch a glimpse of the class bully, decades later.

Every felt sense is different and every one unique and precisely so.

Focusing is a series of steps through which the felt sense naturally unfolds and emerges, with one step unlocking the next, each bringing fresh insights and clarity. A felt sense may take a while to reveal itself, most often arriving initially as a subtle sensation or feeling but as we form a relationship with it, we allow that felt sense to come into view and reveal its next step. As each step unfolds, the body offers something new: a sensation, a feeling, an image, a movement, a gesture, a memory or a thought, each revealing more about our inner experience.

Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words. Gendlin used the analogy of a poet struggling to find the last line of his poem. He sits with it and different lines come, and with time and checking back in with the felt sense, finally the right words emerge, and with them a sense of relief or 'rightness'. When we capture the felt sense precisely, the resonance is felt in our bodies, facilitating the next step. The felt sense always knows the next step and so it carries forward spontaneously, naturally unfolding, one step implying the next. We never tell the felt sense what it needs to do or be, we never intervene, rather we simply allow the felt sense to be just as it is, trusting that it knows the right next step.

'A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. Physical. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time: encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once, rather than detail by detail.'¹ (p37)

Often the steps are small but sometimes a large step – a *felt shift* – follows a series of smaller steps. A felt shift brings clarity, relief and an inner easing about this particular life situation, together with new ways of making sense of old patterns. Our body feels the deep truth and trusts the permanency of the change occurring inside, as we arrive at new understandings of ourselves.

The synergy between focusing and coaching

Coaching and focusing are optimistic ways of working, based on the expectation of positive change. Gendlin's expression, 'Life wants to live', speaks to life having its own natural forward direction, '...whatever else might also be going on.'¹ In both focusing and coaching, we share the belief that the client's answers will naturally emerge when we listen deeply to what is going on, trust the client's internal knowing and life's natural forward direction.

It takes practice for coaches to experience and trust the focusing process but with a desire to learn, we experience the natural ease with which the crossing between focusing and coaching unfolds. In addition to the new perspectives that focusing brings to our coaching, we are gifted with an understanding of what it means to listen deeply.

Similarities between coaching and focusing include:

- **A forward moving agenda.** The first step in coaching is a forward moving agenda, while the fundamental premise of why focusing works is that the life energy within us implies the next step. As the client connects to the felt experience of their agenda, we find both the blocked energy and the forward moving energy, which together hold the focusing, change step
- **Acceptance of 'what is'.** A deep belief that whatever is there is there for a reason, and once felt and acknowledged fully, change will naturally occur, emerge or find its right next step
- **Trusting the client to find their own answers.** In both coaching and focusing, the coach's role is to create the safe space and use the skills to support the client to connect inwardly to their own truth, suspending personal interference, so we can be fully present for our client

- **Commonality of the skills necessary for 'what is' to emerge.** The key skills of slowing the pace, deep listening, reflecting back empathetically, acknowledging what's here, offering encouragement and bringing the conversation into and holding it in, the here and now
- **Importance of the relationship.** When we feel safe and supported our capacity to connect inwardly increases and feeling held in the relationship, our ability to listen to and hear ourselves are enhanced
- **Primacy of human presence.** Above all else, what is needed for forward movement to naturally occur is to be listened to and acknowledged by another human being. We do this by being fully present to ourselves and our client, connected yet unattached to, our own life experiences.

What is focusing-oriented coaching?

Focusing-oriented coaching is a coaching approach in which the coach is always oriented towards the felt *experience* of their client. Here, the coach is not expressly teaching focusing but rather holding a space for the client's experience to emerge, supporting the client to connect inwardly and in doing so, enabling them to articulate their in-the-moment experience of their coaching agenda, from where fresh insights and new understanding unfold, eliciting increased self-compassion and natural forward-moving energy.

In focusing-oriented coaching, the coach creates an environment that allows the client to feel safe and supported, inviting them to pause and 'be' in their body, connecting inward to whatever is already there or what might come in response to the client's coaching agenda.

The coach encourages the client to be fully present to anything and everything that may arise in response to their coaching agenda; the 'all of that' felt experience. In order for the client to trust what comes in their bodies, the coach must role-model presence; guiding, reassuring, pointing towards the unfolding steps of awareness, using their knowledge of the focusing process to help the client move through change steps.

The coach encourages the client to speak out their fresh living experience, however inarticulate, so that both coach and client can be with the unfolding experience. The coach repeats back key words and feelings precisely, supporting the client to check the resonance of what is repeated back, against their inner experience. In the hearing back and checking the rightness or not quite rightness of what has been articulated, increasing clarity emerges. As the client continues to feel safe and supported, and with this increasing implicit precision and clarity, the inner space expands and they connect with their felt

sense more easily and more deeply and so, the focusing process unfolds.

The coach's key role is to help the client stay connected to their felt sense, to notice when they lose connection and help the client reconnect with their felt sense, while being fully present and compassionate to what emerges. It may seem like the coach has little to 'do' and on one level, that is true, but the coach's presence and their lived understanding of the focusing process, are vital in helping the client stay connected to their inner experience.

A focusing-oriented coach must have a deep understanding of focusing, through experience and practice of being with the inner experience of their own life situations. Having this allows them to:

1. Understand the client's process, recognise when the client has lost connection with their felt sense, identify change steps or felt shifts and trust in the naturally unfolding process
2. Find the balance between offering support and trusting the client's capacity to directly relate to their unfolding experience, and
3. Be with whatever emerges inside them, in order to be fully present to the client, the client's process and clear the interactive space between coach and client.

As the session concludes, the focusing-oriented coach supports the client to articulate their sense of how their focusing experience informs and creates forward movement in their coaching agenda. They reassure the client of the permanency of the focusing change steps that have taken place, and invite them to consider additional action steps that promote thought and behavioural changes in their lives.

“

Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words



Focusing-oriented coaching in practice

The following client example illustrates focusing-oriented coaching in practice.

Client talks about a recent explosive interaction with a challenging work colleague

Coaching agenda is: *identify practical steps towards a respectful and positive relationship*

1. An invitation to a different way of being

For a felt sense of our coaching agenda to form, both the coach and client must adopt a focusing presence; beginning with a pause, slowing down and coming into our bodies. We turn our attention inward to create an open and compassionate space, so we can allow our in-the-moment, lived experience of our agenda to form.

Coach supports the client to invite a felt sense of 'all of that' situation

2. Forming a relationship with the felt sense

In some situations, a felt sense is already there or may emerge as a strong response to the client's agenda, but often it can take time to show itself. As we welcome whatever is there, we create a safe space for a felt sense to slowly form. Initially we might notice a subtle sensation or feeling, a 'something' that has an unclear vagueness to it but as we turn towards and form a relationship with it, we allow that felt sense to come into view.

Client articulates that there is '*something in my stomach ... a sickness feeling ... like bubbles fizzing*'

3. Repeating back and checking for rightness

Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words. We stay at the edge of this something, simply allowing it space and sensing inward, from where the felt sense comes more fully into view offering more; maybe a word or an image. The focusing presence creates this unique interaction, as the coach empathetically repeats back and the client checks for rightness, bringing implicit precision and in turn, the next step.

Coach repeats back client's words

Client checks with the felt sense and the words '*bubbling up*' come **[Change step]**

Client stays with '*bubbling up*' and gets an image of a pressure cooker **[Change step]**

Client feels energy releasing upward, concentrated towards a specific area in their chest and describing that sensation, they get a sense that there is so much already in this pressure cooker and the 'lid could blow' **[Change step]**

4. Finding the right distance to be with 'all of that' situation

Forming a relationship with the felt sense allows coach and client to be *with* but not *in* whatever comes. This allows us to separate from what is happening inside us, offering the opportunity to 'widen the lens'. A felt sense is not an emotion; it is bigger than an emotion and as we support the client to find the right distance, they sense so much more than just the emotion (anger, in this example) as the unfolding felt sense gathers up the totality of the situation.

Client feels anger and as the coach supports the client to find the right distance to be with this anger, what comes is not just the recent interaction but all the times this work colleague 'sneered' and 'looked down' on them. **[Change step]** Coach repeats back and client checks the emerging felt sense. Words come: *Slighted? No. Small? No. Not seen? No. Unseen? Yes! That's it and precisely so ... Unseen!*

[Change step]

Client feels tenderness in their chest and articulates this *Unseen* feeling, with tears and self-compassion

[Change step]

Fresh energy releases and flows upwards through the client's body, together with a flood of realisations, specific to them, nothing to do with their colleague, like a recurring pattern in their other relationships, a background feeling in their life, or maybe memories from their childhood. **[Felt shift]**

5. Revisiting the client's agenda

The understanding, clarity, self-compassion and energy release are experienced in a visceral way. New energy flows naturally, and the client experiences a deep sense of rightness and knowing. The coach must reassure the client to trust the bodily changes that have taken place, and the next steps that are already implied in their new bodily understanding. They invite the client to revisit their agenda, supporting them to articulate the sense-making, while enquiring about practical next steps.

“

**We feel more than we can think,
and we live more than we can feel**

'Experiencing is a myriad richness that exceeds any number of separated facets. There is vastly more than our conceptual structures can encompass. And experiencing moves; we cannot think all that just was. We feel more than we can think, and we live more than we can feel. And if we enter into what we feel in certain genuine steps, we feel more than before. And there is much more still.'³

Focusing-oriented coaching is a powerful way of working. As we learn to trust the focusing process, both we and our clients are gifted with increased self-compassion, greater understanding of ourselves and a deepening trust in the wisdom of our bodies. ■

© Báirbre Meehan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Báirbre Meehan is a focusing-oriented coach and coach supervisor. Her practice is informed by 25 years in people management in roles such as CEO, organisational/leadership development and finance director. Her coaching journey began 12 years ago, when her personal development journey led her to focusing and from there the integration of these powerful ways of working naturally emerged. Báirbre self-funded a research project measuring the impact of a focusing-oriented coaching approach on people with low mental wellbeing (MWB). Referrals came from medical doctors, psychotherapists and

word of mouth and quantitative measurements showed significant MWB improvements, maintained over the longer term.

Focusing-oriented coaching is Báirbre's passion and she is devoted to developing and sharing it with others. Báirbre regularly runs focusing-oriented coaching programmes. To find out more, contact Báirbre via her website: www.pause.ie

REFERENCES

- 1 Gendlin E. Focusing. New York: Bantam; 1978.
- 2 Purton C. Person-centred therapy: the focusing-oriented approach. London: Palgrave MacMillan; 2004.
- 3 Gendlin E. Focusing. Unpublished early draft; 1978.

Advertising

— **DON'T MISS THIS NEW TITLE!** —

CASE STUDIES IN SPIRITUAL COACHING

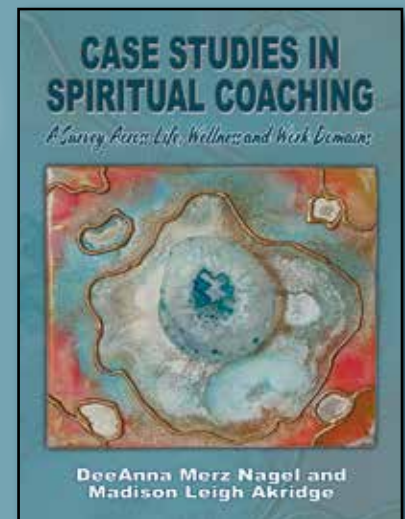
A Survey Across Life, Wellness and Work Domains

DeeAnna Merz Nagel and Madison Leigh Akridge

The text addresses a major problem in teaching and informing practitioners and trainees about the application of spirituality within the field of coaching.

The book will be a succinct series of case studies while providing cutting-edge tools and interventions for the coaching profession. Both editors are certified coaches as well as licensed mental health practitioners in the counseling and social work fields.

The goal of this book is to offer guidance for the coach whose client brings direct or indirect spiritual content into the coaching session. Each chapter highlights established coach skills such as active listening, powerful questioning, and goal setting. The text brings together both seasoned spiritual coaches who have influenced this new and growing area coaching profession, and new spiritual coaches who bring their own diverse knowledge.



276 pp (7 x 10)

6 illustrations

\$41.95 978-0-398-09420-1 (paper)

\$41.95 978-0-398-09421-8 (ebook)

Order your copy today!
ccthomas.com • Amazon • GooglePlay

www.ccthomas.com offers FREE shipping on all retail orders within the Continental United States.