

Focusing Learning Experience 2024

Self-Awareness Module

Grade Level Range: Middle School - Adult

To Teachers:

Focusing is complex and takes time to master. It is a more advanced skill. Before beginning these lessons, students need to be competent at identifying their feelings and why they feel that way. In addition, I suggest you become skilled in using the Focusing process before teaching it to students. If you have not already done so, please review the Self-Awareness Reading and the Introduction to Teaching Self-Awareness ([Self-Awareness Module](#)) for suggestions on teaching SES, processing learning experiences, applying skills in real-life situations, and assessing, evaluating, and grading SES.

It is unhealthy to be unaware of our feelings. When we are unaware of or deny our feelings, we don't understand who we are, how we are, or how we wish to become. It takes energy to deny or suppress feelings from self and others, energy we don't have for the people and things we value most. The more we are aware of and accept our feelings and appropriately express them to others, the more energy we will have. We do not manage our feelings by pretending they don't exist or by holding them inside. We manage them by accepting our feelings and why we feel that way and expressing them to others when appropriate. Pleasant feelings can be a catalyst for continuing our actions, and unpleasant feelings can motivate change. Before we can change, we must be aware of our feelings and why we feel that way. Becoming aware of what we feel and why can be very difficult. Our feelings can be vague, and feelings like anger may only be a secondary feeling that masks deeper feelings. Feelings like anger may only be the tip of an iceberg and not reveal deeper feelings below the water line. We may have other feelings before we experience anger, which may trigger anger. What is important is that we identify all of our feelings in a given situation and determine why we feel that way. Focusing, a process developed by Eugene T. Gendlin, is a skill that helps us discover the full depth of what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. It is best used when we aren't entirely sure what we are feeling, when we have a vague sense that something is not right, that we don't feel good, or when we use general terms like feeling depressed, bad, or unhappy, feelings that don't fully describe the extent of our emotions and why we feel that way. It can also be used when we are angry to understand the feelings that may have triggered our anger. It can be used when we are coping with feelings and personal problems in unhealthy ways, such as taking our feelings out on others, expressing our feelings violently, or when we are withdrawing from other people. It can also be used when we use other unhealthy coping methods such as denying and/or ignoring our feelings and problems, telling ourselves we shouldn't let this bother us (belittling a problem), trying to convince ourselves not to let it get to us and that it is no big deal (facing down the problem), telling ourselves we shouldn't feel that way (lecturing our self), or when we try to figure it out intellectually. Like all skills, learning the Focusing process takes time and practice to master. Below are the major steps in the Focusing process, followed by an adaptation of a story of "A Trivial Problem" (from Gendlin's book *Focusing: A step-by-step technique that takes you past getting in touch with your feelings—to change them and solve your personal problems.*)

Procedure/Directions:

1. Review the concepts in The Focusing Process Reading below.
2. Distribute a copy of the Focusing Process below and draw an equilateral triangle on the board to represent an iceberg. Review the steps in the Focusing process below and then read aloud the Trivial Problem below so that students can see the steps applied to a real-life problem. As Peggy in the Trivial Problem goes through each of The Steps in the Focusing Process below, write on the triangle/iceberg, starting at the tip of the iceberg, and describe her feelings/identification of the crux of the problem as she goes through the steps. She begins with her initial feeling of anger at John for breaking the dish (placed above the water line), and she moves to other feelings placed below the water line as she develops a deeper awareness of her feelings. Those feelings include:
 - anger at John's air of jubilation and the way he radiated confidence about his future,
 - jealous of John's success,
 - feeling left behind and stuck in her career which is placed at the base of the triangle/iceberg.
3. Use this example to make the following points:
 - Having identified what was really bothering her, she was able to be happy for John and not take her feelings about being stuck in her career out on him.
 - This is an example of how anger can be a secondary feeling that masks deeper feelings.
 - Discovering the real problem allowed them to talk calmly later about their lives and future and allowed her to begin exploring what she wanted to do with her future.
 - If she had not gone through this process, she probably would have remained angry at John, would not have been able to be happy for him, and would not have identified the main problem of being stuck in her career, thus not starting to explore what to do.
 - This example also illustrates how being aware of the full depth of our feelings can help us uncover personal and interpersonal problems. That knowledge can, in and of itself, make us feel better but also allow us to start exploring what we need to do to change ourselves, our situation, our environments, and/or our relationships.
4. For another example to demonstrate the Focusing process, see the first five steps of the Jealousy example (the remaining steps are examples of reality-checking).
5. Once students understand the steps in the process, have them use the process for a personal example. You can do this in one of two ways. The first would be to read each step aloud and ask the students to answer to themselves, giving them a few minutes between each step. The second way would be to have them take out a sheet of paper and record their answers to each question as they read it aloud. Specify that you do not want them to write their name on the paper, and you will not collect their papers or ask them to share the contents of what they have written.

Processing the Learning Experience: Following the completion of their personal example, ask the following questions:

1. What was it like for you to use the Focusing process?
2. Was it easy for you to use this process? Why or why not?
3. Did you feel better or worse as a result of using this process? Why or why not?
4. Ask, by a show of hands, how many of them were surprised at the number of things they had on their “list” that were keeping them from feeling wonderful.
5. Ask, by a show of hands, how many of them discovered that the thing that was bothering them the most was something they were unaware of?
6. Ask, by a show of hands, how many of them came to a better understanding of a feeling, a problem, or a concern.
7. Ask by a show of hands if they plan to make any changes due to completing this process.

Follow-Up Activities:

- The skill of Focusing is complex and a more advanced skill, and it takes time to master. To ensure that students master the skill, you must provide them with multiple opportunities to practice it in class or at home. Have students complete the Focusing Project (see the **SES Projects** module),

Attribution/Source:

I strongly suggest Eugene T. Gendlin’s book *Focusing: A step-by-step technique that takes you past getting in touch with your feeling—to change them and solve your personal problems*.

The Focusing Process Reading

It is unhealthy to be unaware of our feelings. When we are unaware of or deny our feelings, we don't understand who we are, how we are, or how we wish to become. It takes energy to deny or suppress feelings from self and others, energy we don't have for the people and things we value most. The more we are aware of and accept our feelings and appropriately express them to others, the more energy we will have. We do not manage our feelings by pretending they don't exist or by holding them inside. We manage them by accepting our feelings and why we feel that way and expressing them to others when appropriate. Pleasant feelings can be a catalyst for continuing our actions, and unpleasant feelings can motivate change. Before we can change, we must be aware of our feelings and why we feel that way. Becoming aware of what we feel and why can be very difficult. Our feelings can be vague, and feelings like anger may only be a secondary feeling that masks deeper feelings. Feelings like anger may only be the tip of an iceberg and not reveal deeper feelings below the water line. We may have other feelings before we experience anger, which may trigger anger. What is important is that we identify all of our feelings in a given situation and determine why we feel that way. Focusing, a process developed by Eugene T. Gendlin, is a skill that helps us discover the full depth of what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. It is best used when we aren't entirely sure what we are feeling, when we have a vague sense that something is not right, that we don't feel good, or when we use general terms like feeling depressed, bad, or unhappy, feelings that don't fully describe the extent of our emotions and why we feel that way. It can also be used when we are angry to understand the feelings that may have triggered our anger. It can be used when we are coping with feelings and personal problems in unhealthy ways, such as taking our feelings out on others, expressing our feelings violently, or when we are withdrawing from other people. It can also be used when we use other unhealthy coping methods such as denying and/or ignoring our feelings and problems, telling ourselves we shouldn't let this bother us (belittling a problem), trying to convince ourselves not to let it get to us and that it is no big deal (facing down the problem), telling ourselves we shouldn't feel that way (lecturing our self), or when we try to figure it out intellectually. Like all skills, learning the Focusing process takes time and practice to master.

The Focusing Process

Focusing is a skill that can help us discover what keeps us from feeling wonderful at any given time. It can also help us understand feelings, problems, dilemmas, and conflicts in greater depth than we may initially understand them. Once we become clearer and more aware of what keeps us from feeling wonderful, we usually feel better. Knowing and accepting what is bothering us in and of itself can make us feel better. However, only when we fully understand our feelings, a problem, a conflict, or a dilemma can we do something about it by changing ourselves, our situation, our environments, and/or our relationships.

The outline below is my adaptation of Eugene T. Gendlin's Focusing process, followed by an adaptation of a story of *A Trivial Problem* (from his book) that demonstrates the steps in the process and illustrates how initial feelings can be just the tip of an iceberg and to fully understand what we are feeling we may need to spend time going deeper to discover the foundation of our feelings.

Steps in the Focusing Process

Find a time and a place to sit quietly for a while without any distractions. Stop after each question (when you see...). Don't try to answer the questions with your thoughts or thinking brain. Allow your answers to come from the place where you feel. At some point, you will feel the problem changing, like you are getting closer to figuring it out, like you are getting warmer, like remembering something you forgot. There will be a shift, a feeling like "this is right." Continue until you have an "ah ha" experience, that "yes, this is what I am feeling and why I feel this way." A problem is like an iceberg. You initially see the tip, but you must go very deep to discover the base, the part that is making you feel less than wonderful.

1. Ask yourself: "How do I feel? Why don't I feel wonderful right now? What is bugging me on this particular day? Stay quiet. Listen. Let what comes, come. Let all the problems come up and out, making a mental or written list. Don't get snagged on any one problem. Keep listing the problems until you hear something within you say, "Yes, except for those I'm fine." Make a mental or written list of everything keeping you from feeling wonderful right now...
2. Ask: "Which problem feels the worst right now? Don't try to make an intellectual choice. Let your body decide which problem feels the worst on this day. Let the answer come from the place where you feel. Ask: "Which problem feels the worst right now...?"
3. Ask: What does this whole problem feel like? Pay attention to that inner part of you where you feel things. Get a felt sense of what the whole problem feels like. Don't try to decide anything. Let the answer come from within, a felt sense of what this problem feels like.

4. Now ask yourself: What is the crux (central part) of this problem?" What is the worst of it? What is the main thing in it that makes me feel bad? Ask the question, then wait. Let the main crux of the problem come to you—not from your thinking brain—but from the felt sense itself. Ask: what is the main part of this problem (what is the worst of it)...?
5. Now, take what you consider the worst of it and check it to make sure it fits your felt sense of the problem. Ask yourself: "Do these words and the felt sense match the problem exactly? Wait for an answer to come from the place where you feel. Ask: Do these words and the felt sense match the problem exactly...?
6. If the words and the felt sense don't exactly match the problem, go further. Ask yourself, what have I left out...?
7. Now, try to go further with the problem. Get the felt sense of what is under or behind this feeling—what is behind the crux of this problem. What is still bothering me about it? What other feelings do I have about this problem? Continue focusing until you have a felt sense that you have it all, like remembering something important that you forgot, like an ah-ha experience: "Yes, so that's it, that is the main part of this problem. This is why I feel this way". Remember, a problem is like an iceberg. You initially see the tip, but you must go very deep to discover the base, the part that is making you feel stuck. Continue to ask, what is the worst of this until you have a felt sense that, yes, this is why I feel this way. Ask: what is under or behind this feeling—what is behind the crux of this problem? What is still bothering me about it? What other feelings do I have about this problem...?
8. If you are still stuck, if you haven't had the "ah ha," this is what I am feeling (like remembering something you forgot), ask yourself the following questions and let the answers come from within.
 - What is the worst of this feeling?
 - What's really so bad about this?
 - What does it need?
 - What should happen?
 - What would it feel like if it were all O.K.?

If you still feel stuck, if you have not had that "ah ha" this is what I am feeling (like remembering something you forgot), you can stop and come back to it at a later point.

The Story of a “Trivial Problem”

Peggy and her husband, John, are in their early 20s and live in a suburb. They have one child, a 5-year-old son. Joe works at a bank where he has a real chance to become a vice president. Peggy had put her career on hold as a potential business executive to stay home and raise their son until he starts first grade. She works part-time as a secretary.

One evening, John comes home jubilant. The bank president told him he is strongly considered a key element in the bank’s expansion plans. In his excitement, while telling Peggy, he knocks a dish off the kitchen table, and it breaks. It’s her best china, which was handed down to her by her mother. Peggy flew into a sudden rage, ran upstairs in tears, and refused to cook dinner. She was surprised because outbursts and stormy scenes were not usual for her. She tried to patch herself up using all those familiar approaches:

1. She tried to ignore her feelings (ignore the feelings or problems), but that didn’t work.
2. So, he broke an expensive dish. Am I so dumb that I can be upset by that? It’s replaceable. I shouldn’t let such a little thing bother me. (Belittling the Problem). That didn’t work. She still felt bad.
3. She told herself to let it go and not let it get to her (face down the problem), but that doesn’t make her feel any better.
4. She lectured herself about why she shouldn’t feel this way and that it was no big deal (lecture yourself about why you shouldn’t feel this way), but that didn’t work either.

Next, she tried to intellectually figure it out.

5. Maybe it’s the strain of the last several days. I have all this work piling up, and that project is due.
6. Maybe it’s because I haven’t gotten enough sleep.
7. Maybe I’m upset because of my sprained ankle, and I haven’t been able to run.
8. And then there is the problem with our son. That didn’t work. What Peggy told herself might be true, but nothing changed inside. The angry, irritated feeling stayed right where it was.

She decided to try Focusing. She had practiced it for several years and was very good at it—was, in a sense, fluent in it as one might be fluent in a familiar language. She began by getting as comfortable as possible, removing all necessary distractions. She went through the steps.

Why Don’t I Feel Wonderful Right Now? What is bugging me on this particular day? She stayed quiet and listened. She let whatever came to her come. She didn’t allow herself to focus on any one problem. She made a list, and when she felt like she was done, she said, “Yes, except for those, I’m fine.”

She then asked herself, which problem feels the worst right now? She didn't try to make an intellectual choice. She let the worst one emerge. She allowed her body to decide. She let her attention go to the one that felt the worst right now. She asked: what does all that feel like? She then waited and let the feelings come to her in their own way—large, vague, formless at first, lacking words to describe it, lacking labels or identifying marks of any kind. She wasn't impatient with this formlessness. She didn't demand that it identify itself. Nor did she try to force an identification upon it. What emerged as the worst right now was the situation with John.

Next, she very gently asked what the crux of the feeling is, the worst part of this situation with John. Again, she avoided analysis, self-lectures, assumptions, and deductions. She wanted the answer to float up from the feelings inside, not the confused clutter in her mind. What came back to the question of "what is the crux or main part of the problem?" was anger at John. But the problem seemed bigger than that. She took what came to her and asked if her anger at John seemed to be it or if it was anger that he broke the dish. The wordless reply from within was no. The dish had hardly anything to do with it. The anger is over his air of jubilation, the way he radiates confidence about his future. Oh. Thus, the problem changed. The inner shift was unmistakable. She felt the problem changing. So she asked, what is behind this? What is the crux of this, being angry over his air of jubilation? She sat patiently and let the feelings speak for itself. Some words came, and I'm jealous of John's success. Oh, so that's it. She felt the beginning of another shift, but somehow it didn't feel perfectly satisfactory. The feeling and words apparently were a close match, but not perfect.

She took the word and checked it against the feeling. Jealous. Is that the right word? Is that what I feel? She waited. And then, abruptly, the right words came. The feeling isn't exactly jealousy. There's jealousy in it somewhere, but it's more...like a feeling of being left behind. "Ah ha". That's it; I feel like I'm being left behind in my career. It came with a large, satisfying sense of movement. Peggy's body was telling her that she was unhappy that her career was stalled. When she realized this was the crux of the problem, she had this felt sense, like when someone remembers something they are trying to remember. It seems like you will remember it; it is on the tip of your tongue, and then you forget it.

This feeling of being left behind was only the tip of the iceberg. So, she started through the process again. What is this left behind feeling? What's the crux of that? What's bothering me about it—what is the worst of it? Peggy spent a total of 20 minutes with the problem. She wrote in her journal to remember what she had learned. The shape of the problem has shifted (from being angry at John for breaking the dish) to her feeling left behind in her career. This realization allowed her to be happy for John, and they were later able to talk calmly about their lives and their future. The one focusing session had not made Peggy's career—versus motherhood problem vanish, but she felt better since she had gotten it out in the open and had not held anger against John when that was not the primary feeling. As a result of using the Focusing process, the shape of her problem had changed, and so she had changed. The broken dish was forgotten. Additional sessions told her more about herself and helped her to move from where she was stuck. It turned out that her career problem was not insoluble. She had not seen the possibilities before because she had not taken the time to fully become aware of what was going on within her.

This story illustrates how our feelings can be vague, or a feeling like anger may only be an initial feeling that may mask deeper feelings. Initial feelings may only be the tip of the iceberg and not reveal deeper feelings that exist below the water line. We may have other feelings before we experience anger, which may trigger anger, and we may take our anger out on others. It also illustrates that when we are unaware of our feelings, we are unable to solve problems, conflicts, and dilemmas and move forward to resolve them.