

Don't Go It Alone



The Power of Focusing Partnerships

By Joan Klagsbrun and Lynn Preston

It's not exactly a state secret: most of us become therapists because we want to help people. We want to help them feel less alone with their pain and find ways to transform their problems, however weighty or seemingly intractable they may be, into workable challenges. This is what keeps our professional juices flowing—the experience of making a significant difference to the struggling people we see in our therapy offices.

Yet we're not miracle workers. When we're slow to help a client get back on her feet (and this happens more often than we might like to admit), it's not always easy to maintain our enthusiasm and confidence about our work. For instance, a therapist named Sally recently told me the story of seeing a 34-year-old woman who'd fallen into a deep depression after being rejected by her boyfriend. As the client slouched into the therapy room for her 10th visit, she reenacted the opening scene of every appointment thus far: lowering herself heavily onto a chair, she sighed, gazed down at the rug, and announced tonelessly, "I'm still depressed."

"So why don't you try to make some of the changes we've been talking about?" Sally retorted sharply.

As she watched her client go pale, Sally was aghast. Where had that impatient

tone of voice, so tinged with judgment, come from? It seemed this fed-up discouragement had been building in her for several weeks with this client. Worse, Sally's feelings of ineptitude were beginning to leak into sessions with other hard-to-budge clients. Her capacity for compassion seemed to be shrinking. Now, as she struggled to slow her breathing, a small inner voice whispered, Do I even want to be doing this work anymore?

Contacting the Felt Sense

A growing body of research indicates that when we don't feel effective in our work, burnout is likely to follow. Slowly but insistently, we begin to feel heavy-hearted and demoralized. Although we may not quite understand the source of our malaise, we know something doesn't feel right. We may even wonder whether we've chosen the wrong profession.

Or maybe we just need a way to freshly grasp what's actually brewing inside us, and use that knowledge to begin to rediscover the energy and excitement that drew us to the therapy profession in the first place. In fact, as long-time clinicians in private practice, the two of us have discovered how to do just that through a process called Focusing partnerships.

Unlike peer supervision, which tends to focus on problem-solving about the client's issues, this two-person encounter emphasizes the clinician's issues, especially those that are still fuzzy or half-formed, not yet able to be verbalized. It lets us dive beneath our cognitive brain into our embodied knowing to find what's actually troubling us, and use that knowledge to recover our zest for our work and our lives.

Focusing partnerships evolved out of Focusing-oriented psychotherapy, developed in the 1960s by University of Chicago philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin. In collaboration with Carl Rogers, Gendlin interviewed hundreds of therapy clients to try to tease out the elements that made for

successful outcomes. He found that clients who used therapy most effectively were able to make direct contact with their bodily experiences and speak from those deeply felt sensations, rather than only from their rational brains. Gendlin coined the term felt sense to describe this deep, preverbal knowledge or awareness that's not available to the conscious mind. In the arena of clinical burnout, it might show up as the heavy dread in your stomach as a particular client walks into your office, or the jittery flutter in your throat as you ponder how to respond to another client's challenge of "How can this therapy actually help me?"

But the felt sense isn't just a way to get in touch with our experience: it also has the power to gently propel us out of our stuck places and move us forward in our daily lives. Gendlin and Roger's studies further found that when individuals paused and tuned into a bodily sense, they could articulate what had previously been outside their awareness. For example, after contacting a tightening in her throat—and perhaps engaging in a brief conversation with that constricted place—a Focuser might say, "Oh, now I get it. I'm scared about the talk I have to give next week at the conference. I'm afraid I don't know enough about couples therapy and my colleagues will know I'm an impostor."

Even more meaningfully, verbalization of the felt sense naturally produces what Gendlin called a step, a small release and an increase in life energy that moves us in the direction of healing and growth. In this moment, for example, the therapist-cum-lecturer may recognize her long-term struggle with perfectionism in a fresh way—which, in turn, may spur a process of beginning to accept that she doesn't need to be flawless to be competent.

Focusing-oriented psychotherapy got its start as a therapeutic model, but it wasn't long before impromptu Focusing partnerships began to form between therapists, who paired up to support each other in doing this deep work of self-discovery. Today, increasing numbers of clinicians are forming Focusing

partnerships throughout the country and around the world. Typically, participants get together in person, on the phone, or via Skype every week or so. During a session, each individual receives equal time to explore and issue or his or her choice.

In our own experience, the special power of the Focusing partnership is its ability to take us out of the isolation we often experience as we carry the heavy responsibilities inherent in our profession. It's an antidote to the kind of circular thinking we tend to get mired in when we try to figure out everything alone. It lets us feel safe and compassionately attended to as we plunge into parts of ourselves that are still indistinct or unknown.

We sometimes use the process to plumb issues in our personal lives, but we find it equally effective in helping us discover what may be hampering or limiting us in our work. Over and over, our joint Focusing sessions leave us refreshed and renewed, uncovering new possibilities for ourselves that make us more clinically effective and once again enthused about doing psychotherapy.

Like Crumpled Newspaper

Liz, a colleague of ours, was feeling anything but enthused as she walked into her peer supervision meeting. "My client Sherry exhausts me," she sighed as she sat down. "But I can't put my finger on why." After Liz described some of Sherry's behavior in recent therapy sessions, two members of the group suggested that Sherry might well have borderline features. They made sound suggestions about establishing clearer boundaries and commiserated with Liz about the challenges of seeing someone with this complex diagnosis.

But Liz felt that something deeper was keeping her feeling ineffective and discouraged by Sherry—something she couldn't yet see clearly or put into words. That evening she called Jack, her Focusing partner of two years, for their regular weekly session.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Jack invited Liz to begin the Focusing process. “Take your time sensing into how you feel right now,” he said. Liz responded by closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Before long, she noticed a distinct clutching sensation in the center of her stomach.

“It feels tense and tight,” she said, still keeping her eyes closed. “I’m so frustrated with my client Sherry, the one I’ve talked about before. Whenever I think about it, my belly feels like a crumpled newspaper.” She placed her hand on her stomach, rubbing it distractedly. “I can’t stand this feeling!”

After reflecting back to Liz the clutching sensation in her belly and how it felt like a crumpled newspaper, Jack asked simply, “Is there more?”

Liz was silent for a moment. Then she said, “I guess I’m starting to dread sessions with Sherry because of her chronic lament: My life is unbearable. Therapy isn’t working. Fifty minutes isn’t enough. Can’t you give me a few more minutes? I’m totally exasperated!” Liz exclaimed, surprising herself as the words formed. “Nothing I do is helpful! Everything I say seems to miss the mark.”

Slowly and softly, Jack repeated Liz’s words back to her. Then he said, “How about if you pause now and see if you can get a felt sense for the whole situation: Sherry’s blaming, your own experience of clutching, and the crumpled sensation in your belly that emerges in response?”

After a few moments, Liz took a long breath and nodded. “I keep trying too hard with her,” she said. “Trying to no avail. I always feel like I’m failing.”

Jack mirrored her. “Something in you feels it has to keep trying and trying, even though it doesn’t help,” he said. “You’re trying too hard with her.”

All at once, Liz sat up straight. “Oh, wow,” she murmured. “My younger sister!

She has a lot of problems—with her kids, with her job—and she’s always asking me to help her fix things. But nothing I say or do is right. Nothing makes her happy. She always has a reason why something I suggest won’t work. All this trying leaves me drained and depleted, crumpled, like yesterday’s newspaper.”

Jack nodded. “So much of this is familiar, like with your sister,” he said. “So much trying, and then the depletion.”

Liz nodded, eyes closed.

“Maybe,” said Jack, “you could just be with that whole drained, depleted, crumpled sense. Kind of sit next to it and see what it might have to say to you.”

Liz paused for several moments, listening inwardly. Then it came to her. “It’s telling me to let go and accept what is,” she said softly. “I can’t save this client or my sister. My urgency about rescuing them gets in the way of being able to connect with either of them.” She took a deep, relaxed breath. “Something’s shifted,” she reported. “I feel lighter.” As she opened her eyes, she found herself chuckling softly with relief.

In her next session with Sherry later that week, Liz felt less defeated and more creative in her responses. At one point, Liz responded to Sherry’s demands for more time by saying, “Of course you’re disappointed and hungry for more. I’m trying to cook us a great dinner, but you’ve had a lifetime of starvation.”

Liz was even able to be playful when Sherry grouched, “You check your text messages only once a day, when you know I’m dying to hear back from you sooner?!”

“I’m such a digital dinosaur, you’re lucky I can ever figure out how to check my texts at all,” Liz joked.

After Sherry left the office at the end of the session, Liz was pleasantly surprised

to find herself looking forward to seeing her next several clients, rather than sinking into her usual post-Sherry pit of exhaustion and self-reproach.

Honoring the Slow, the Still, the Silent

Looking back on the Focusing session between Liz and Jack, one might ask, “How does the process differ from what happens in ordinary conversation with a trusted friend?” One key difference is the priority placed on giving the Focuser full permission to discover, in real time, a piece of truth that she hasn’t yet fully understood—or possibly even known existed.

In ordinary conversation, we tend to report on our problems or our breakthroughs. In the Focusing partnership, we’re granted all the time we need to discover them freshly, right then and there. Also, in regular chats, there’s usually plenty of supportive side talk, even when one person is in the midst of telling his or her story. We say, “Wow, that must have been excruciating!” or “Great job! I can’t believe you were able to pull that off.” But in a Focusing partnership, the listener is fully devoted to the Focuser’s discovery of self without the intrusion of opinion, interpretation, cheerleading, problem-solving, or commentary of any sort, knowing that the most supportive thing he or she can do is reflect back to the Focuser what she’s just said, thereby allowing the Focuser’s own words to reverberate more deeply in her body and heart.

Additionally, in the encounter between Focusing partners, silence is viewed as vital to the process. Focusers do productive work when the listener is simply quiet, present, and attuned. In fact, as one Focusing teacher quipped, “Sometimes, the process is about as noisy and exciting as a blade of grass growing.” But the grass is growing, and the patient, unobtrusive, attentive presence of the listener is essential to allowing those nascent insights to push through the soil toward the sun.

Someone to Accompany Me

As therapists, too many of us go it alone, trying to shoulder our clients' load of expectations, worries, and needs without much opportunity to explore how this work affects our own bodies and spirits. While many of us bring questions about clients to peer supervision, we have little space for exploring our own experience as therapists—what it's like to try to help a sad or furious or hopeless person who may want too much of us, or who may pooh-pooh everything we try, or who may be too discouraged or anxious to risk even small steps toward healing.

Focusing partnerships permit us to feel deeply heard and seen in our own struggles to do the work of psychotherapy, allowing us to investigate how our experiences as clinicians trigger our own veiled vulnerabilities, hopes, and hot buttons. Via this intimate, trustworthy witnessing by a member of our own professional tribe, we feel safe enough to dive straight into our body's wisdom for fresh insight about our stuck places and how we might free ourselves from them. This committed, heart-centered connection with another therapist—a comrade-in-arms who knows in spades the difficulties as well as the delights of the work, and who steadfastly roots for us in our work of self-discovery and renewal—may be our most potent antidote to burnout. If we encounter each other regularly with the aim of uncovering our truth, one day, unbidden, a thought may arise: *Ah, yes, now I remember. This is why I do therapy.*

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What Makes a Focusing Partnership Work?

Go with the Focuser's flow. A key quality in a successful Focusing partnership is a commitment to generative listening. This means that the listener is there to understand, not advise or direct. When the Focuser finishes a thought, and after a sufficient pause, the listener simply mirrors his partner. (Usually, a few evocative words will suffice.) This allows the movement of the session to flow directly from the speaker's felt sense, rather than from the listener's agenda. In the session we describe in the article, Jack did this when he said to Liz, "Something in you feels it has to keep trying and trying, even though it doesn't help." When the Focuser hears her own words, she begins to discover for herself the deeper meanings of her felt sense, and what might help her to address her issue more effectively.

Share the time. During each Focusing partnership session, be sure to share time equally so that each person has a chance to both accompany and be heard by the other. The equal-time rule not only keeps the partnership from becoming asymmetrical, but also builds resourcefulness. When you feel submerged by your own issues and are tempted to talk overtime (especially when your partner assures you that he's doing just fine this week), you could miss the chance to experience the satisfaction and empowerment of helping your partner move forward.

Use questions sparingly. During the Focusing process, an occasional open-

ended question from the listener may be useful. For example, you might ask the speaker a question designed to help her reach down into her bodily sense of the issue, rather than staying at the cognitive level. Jack did this with Liz when he asked, “How about if you pause now and see if you can get a felt sense for the whole situation?” But be judicious here. Where questions are concerned, less is usually more. Your primary mission is to stay present with your partner.

Ask for what you want. In a Focusing partnership, both partners lean into what’s most important in the moment for the Focuser. So at times, the partner who’s Focusing may want to interrupt the process to ask the listener for something, such as, “Could you say that back to me again so I can better hear what I just said?” Or if the listener is offering more mirroring than the Focuser finds helpful, the Focuser can say, “Can you stay silent right now? I just need your presence as I tell you what’s been happening.” The listener knows not to take these requests personally. Her role is to hold the process for the Focuser, not pushing the river, but simply following the currents wherever they lead.