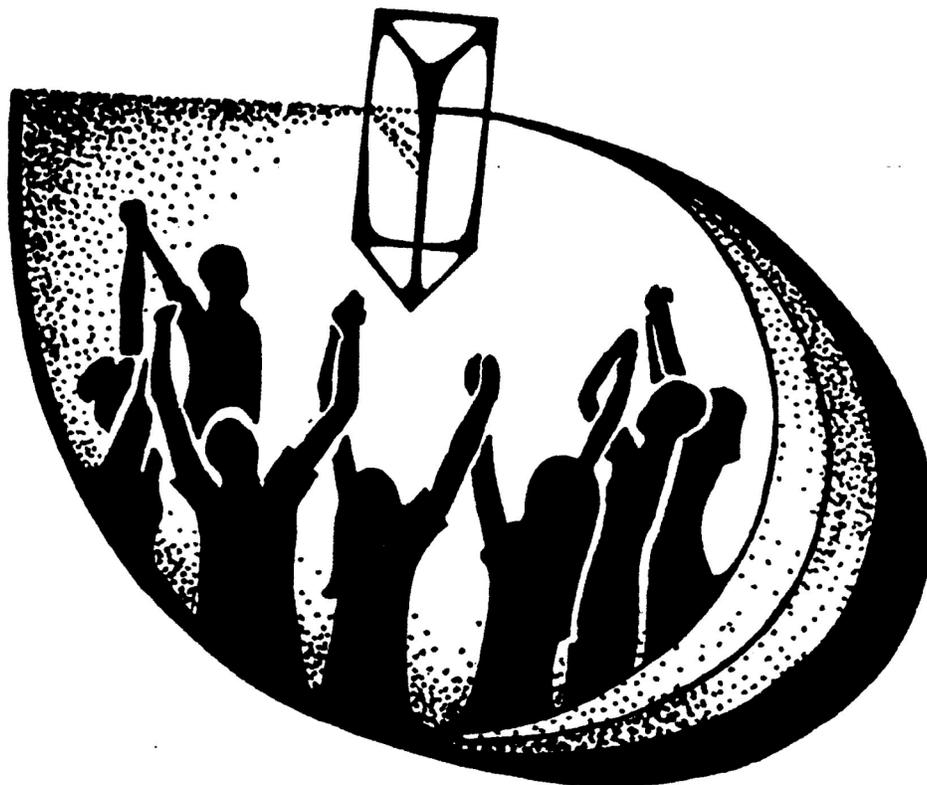


# Focusing in Community



## HOW TO START A LISTENING AND FOCUSING SUPPORT GROUP

1981, 1985, 2007 Kathleen McGuire-Bouwman, PH.D.  
Creative Edge Focusing (TM)

[www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)

**For ye seekers of the crystals of  
Meaningfulness—  
Reality precipitate.  
Light prised through opacity,  
And opened out in hue.**

---Kathy McGuire, 1981

## **NOTE ON LANGUAGE**

I have not yet found a successful resolution to the problem of sexism inherent in our language (that said in 1981; revising the manual in 2007, I will say the same thing!). Many authors have resolved the problem by attaching an initial statement saying that, although no sexism is intended, they have decided to use “The person...he” convention for the time being, because existing alternatives are too cumbersome. In the present volume, in hope of excluding no one, I have decided to alternate conventions from chapter to chapter, Chapter One using “The person...he,” Chapter Two “The person...she,” and so on throughout the book. I hope the “set changes” involved in the reading will be enlightening rather than confusing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/DISCLAIMER

Acknowledgement is due to all of those who have been involved in the Changes Listening/Focusing communities, but particularly to Eugene Gendlin, Mary Hendricks, Kristin Glaser, and Linda Olsen, people with whom many of the skills in this manual were co-developed in the years at Changes Chicago, 1969-1975 and beyond.

Thanks also go to Tom Brouillette, Susan Tait, Catherine Kane, William Teskey, Jeanne Green, Patricia Patton, Beverley Patton, Bob Riggs, and Barbara Claussenius for consistent nurturance of the community dream over the years. A special thanks to Zack Boukydis for being my co-learner and co-leader of support groups in the early years.

Here in 2007, thanks go to Agnes Rodriguez for translating the manual into Spanish (available as *Focusing en Comunidad: Como Empezar un Grupo de Apoyo de Escucha Y Focusing* at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)) and for retyping and reformatting the English version for easier reading!

And to Ruth Hirsch, Franc Chamberlain, Agnes Rodriguez, my husband Rien Bouwman, Suzanna Hicks, Tom at [www.tomorrowdigital.com](http://www.tomorrowdigital.com) and Carolyn Griswold at [www.cgwebhelp.com](http://www.cgwebhelp.com) for emotional and technical support in updating the manual and making it available, with multi-media additional teaching aids, at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com) .

Since the manual was first written in 1981, The Focusing Institute ([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)) has developed an international network of certified Focusing Trainers. It is now possible to learn Listening/Focusing skills and the Focusing Partnership method for peer exchange of turns through a Level One class, usually 20 hours of supervised practice. Then, graduates of the class can continue on in a self-help Changes group. I highly recommend this initial supervised practice as the ideal way to start a support group or as training for professionals wishing to incorporate Focusing Partnership into existing support groups, such as 12-Step.

Certified Creative Edge Focusing Consultants ([www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)) are especially trained in my additional methods of Interpersonal Focusing for conflict resolution, Collaborative Edge Decision Making for group meetings. They have learned how to incorporate these in building Focusing Groups/Teams in work settings for Creative Edge Organizations as well as building Focusing Communities for personal growth.

**Disclaimer: The following techniques are offered purely as self-help skills. In providing this information, Dr. McGuire is not engaged in rendering psychological, financial, legal, or other professional services. If expert assistance or counseling is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought.**

**BIOGRAPHY OF DR. KATHY MCGUIRE,  
Director of Creative Edge Focusing™**

Dr. Kathy McGuire graduated with the Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Chicago in 1975. Eugene Gendlin, creator of the self-help skill Focusing, (*Focusing*, Bantam, 1981) chaired her dissertation on incorporating Listening and Focusing skills into task-oriented groups to increase creativity and quality of decisions.

Dr. McGuire has continued her interest in collaborative decision making and conflict resolution at the interpersonal, group, and international level since that time. She has served on the Board for several non-profit organizations. She has presented workshops throughout the USA and Europe. She is a Certifying Coordinator for The Focusing Institute in New York ([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)).

Dr. McGuire spent twenty-five years in practice as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. She brings to organizational consulting her skills as a psychotherapist, which make her especially expert in dealing with personality issues, interpersonal conflicts, and complicated group and system dynamics.

She has also worked extensively with support groups and community building. She has written numerous articles and two manuals, *Focusing In Community: How To Start A Listening/Focusing Support Group (Focusing en Comunidad)* and *The Experiential Dimension in Therapy*, available at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com).

For thirty-five years, Dr. McGuire has been teaching **Intuitive Focusing** and **Focused Listening skills** to individuals, couples, parents, support groups, communities, and in business and other decision-making settings. Focusing and Listening are a kind of emotional and interpersonal literacy as profound as reading and writing. These simple skills can increase happiness, intimacy, creativity, and productivity across the board.

Dr. McGuire is also interested in the spiritual value of the community created when Focusing and Listening are used to breakdown prejudices and stereotypes and create true understanding. She has created Focusing Communities where ever she has moved for the past thirty years, for emotional support and friendships and as a gift to her communities.

As director of Creative Edge Focusing™ ([www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)) and through The Creative Edge Pyramid of skills and methods, she is committed to bringing Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening skills to every person, every place. Some of her favorite initiatives include Creative Edge Organizations, Building Supportive Community, Positive Parenting, Conscious Relationships, Educating for ADHD, Experiential Focusing Therapy, and Experiencing the Sacred.

Dr. McGuire lives beside Beaver Lake in Northwest Arkansas (home of WalMart) where her husband Marinus “Rien” Bouwman, teaches Accounting at the Sam Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas.

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## PROLOGUE: Changes from 1970's to 2007

### Availability of Supervised Listening/Focusing Instruction

This manual, originally *Building Supportive Community: Mutual Self-Help Through Peer Counseling*, was first published in 1981 after ten years of work with Listening and Focusing skills in self-help contexts. Because of her own extremely positive experiences in Listening/Focusing Communities during the 1970's, Dr. McGuire wanted to find a way to share this approach with anyone wishing to learn.

Since that time, Dr. Eugene Gendlin, who first articulated Focusing as a self-help skill for problem solving, has published his book, *Focusing* (1981), which breaks the Focusing process down into six teachable steps. *Focusing* has been published in over fifteen languages. Gendlin and others also started The Focusing Institute in New York, USA ([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)). The Focusing Institute has trained an international network of certified Focusing Trainers and Focusing Therapists offering classes and workshops in Focusing, Listening, and Focusing Partnership, the exchange of Listening/Focusing turns as peer self-help. And Dr. McGuire has over thirty years experience with communities!

With a Certified Trainer, in approximately twenty hours of training, participants can learn the basic Listening/Focusing skills described in this manual in a supervised setting and to the point where they can then go off and form their own Focusing Partnerships or Focusing Groups for continuing practice in a self-help setting. Trainings are even available by tele-conference, increasing availability even more.

There are also a number of Changes Groups, many of which started as offshoots of Listening/Focusing training classes and workshops. A listing can be found under "Felt Community" at [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org).

Given the wide availability of Listening/Focusing classes and workshops, Dr. McGuire now heartily recommends this training, especially Level One, to anyone wishing to start their own self-help Listening/Focusing Group or Community and to professionals wishing to incorporate Listening/Focusing into existing support groups or counseling settings.

While Dr. McGuire still does believe that motivated individuals can start their own listening/focusing supportive community solely from using this manual, she believes groups will get off on an even stronger footing with Level One training with a certified Focusing Professional. And taking a local class or workshop is a great way to find an initial core group for a self-help group.

Given the huge growth in support groups of every kind since the 1970's, including 12-step groups, Parents Without Partners, Bereavement, Divorce, Cancer, Weight Watchers, and support groups for every kind of illness or life situation, Dr.

McGuire also sees a huge opportunity for helping professionals leading support groups to incorporate Listening and Focusing skills, and eventually the Listening/Focusing exchange, or Focusing Partnership, into existing support contexts.

Focusing Groups and Communities could then be started as an extension of healing in a self-help context and under a degree of supervision by helping professionals. In teaching Listening/Focusing skills, support group facilitators can teach self-reliance. So, more than ever, this manual is also addressed to helping professionals and other facilitators of support groups. Dr. McGuire recommends they also pursue supervised training from certified Focusing Trainers and, perhaps, advance to becoming certified Focusing Trainers themselves.

### **Availability of Multi-Media Teaching Aids**

Also since original publication of this manual, advances in technology have greatly increased the availability of supporting teaching materials. Through CD and DVD replication, Dr. McGuire is now making available, at a very low cost, hours of instruction in Intuitive Focusing, Focused Listening, and Focusing Partnership. Hopefully, you ordered these multi-media materials along with this manual (The Self-Help Package at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)). Dr. McGuire suggests using them repeatedly, individually and in classroom or support group situations, to enhance learning and practicing the core skills.

### **Theory: Increasing Distinction between “Emotions” and “Felt Meaning”**

Also following the conventions of the 1970’s, throughout the manual Dr. McGuire has often used the term “feeling” to refer to Gendlin’s “felt sense,” the preverbal, bodily-experienced “felt meaning” that provides the background “felt experiencing” of our existence. Over time, more careful distinction has been made between “sheer emotions” as physically-experienced sensations of arousal, and the broader “felt meanings” underlying emotions. The Focusing method is specifically designed for helping people to “step out” of repeating behaviors, reactions, thoughts, and emotions, and to “sense into” the broader “felt meaning” from which new solutions, ideas, and action steps can arise. It is not expression of emotions, but Focusing upon the broader “felt meaning” underlying an emotion or behavior, which allows for change. Without Focusing, the same emotion, be it sadness or anger, can repeat and repeat without changing.

In her most recent work, as expressed in the Creative Edge Focusing™ model found at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com), Dr. McGuire has moved toward using the term “intuitive feel” instead of either “feeling” or “felt sense,” to point to that “something that is not-yet-words-and-yet-more-than-words” that we experience as a murky, unclear “sense” about a situation or problem. While the “felt sense” is not theoretically exactly equivalent with an “intuition” or a “hunch” or a “gut feeling,” almost everyone has an “intuitive,” or “felt” understanding of these terms, so Dr. McGuire finds the “intuitive feel” a user-friendly alternative to the “felt sense.”

Dr. McGuire also calls the “intuitive feel” The Creative Edge, constantly reminding us that it is this murky, right-brain, intuitive sensing of our life that holds the next new steps of problem solving. She refers to Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening in describing the two core skills of Creative Edge Focusing™.

She has now defined The Creative Edge Pyramid, seven applications of Listening and Focusing skills for home and work: Focusing Alone, Focusing Partnership, Interpersonal Focusing, Focusing Groups/Teams, Collaborative Edge Decision Making, Focusing Communities, and Creative Edge Organizations.

She also carries the idea of “building supportive community” between work and home situations. She points toward the use of Creative Edge Focusing™ in business as well as in personal growth, as essential to corporations and organizations as to support groups:

- Intuitive Focusing at The Creative Edge, by individuals or in Focusing Groups/Teams, is a predictable source of innovative ideas and creative thinking.
- Interpersonal Focusing, the use of Listening and Focusing for conflict resolution, turns personality clashes into sources of creativity, diversity into riches.
- Collaborative Edge Decision Making, the use of Listening and Focusing during meetings, is a predictable method for win/win decision making
- Creative Edge Organization insures motivation from the bottom up, “buy in,” “commitment,” and “loyalty.” Organizations and corporations become communities, groups of people who have learned to overcome conflict and diversity and to appreciate each other’s unique gifts and talents in collaborative effort toward a common goal

Dr. McGuire also continues her special commitment to the application of Listening and Focusing skills in Parenting, Education, Conscious Relationship, Experiencing The Sacred, Experiential Focusing Therapy

For a thorough update on Dr. McGuire’s latest theory and many practical self-help solutions for home and work, please visit [www.cefocusing.org](http://www.cefocusing.org). For Gendlin’s latest work, visit [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org).

While Dr. McGuire has made some attempt to update the use of terms in the original 1970’s version, she asks you to incorporate her new terms and latest work as you read. So, **back to the 1981 version, slightly modified:**

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. How to Use the Manual

The manual has been written so that any individual can

- sit down and read the manual;
- find a friend or two who will also read it and practice the skills in Part Two; and
- build a supportive community for himself.

However, the manual can also be used by professionals:

- as the basis for a course in community mental health or counseling skills
- as an aid in beginning supportive communities in a variety of settings.

It can be used by professionals and non-professionals alike who want to build non-hierarchical and emotionally supportive work environments for themselves.

The peer counseling model for community offered here also insures a further step toward intimacy to groups who are already meeting some needs through mutual support. The manual is based on ten (in 2007, now thirty!) years of experience with groups in many contexts and is the best solution I have found to the difficulties of living, meeting and working collectively.

The manual teaches peer counseling skills of empathic listening and experiential focusing and tells how to use these skills to provide emotional support, to work through interpersonal conflicts, and to arrive at consensual, cooperative decisions. It tells how to build a peer counseling community, be it as small as four close friends or one open to anyone in a larger community who wants to come.

In a peer counseling community, there is no distinction made between helper and helpee. Everyone learns the core skills, Focused Listening and Intuitive Focusing. Participants exchange counseling turns as equals: I listen to you while you use Focusing on some concern of yours; then you listen to me while I use Focusing on my concern.

The depth of intimacy generated during the exchange of empathic listening turns grows into a feeling of connectedness and mutual regard which soon blossoms into a supportive community: a throughout the week network of friendships and mutually supporting relationships extending into all aspects of participants' life and work.

The manual should be useful to:

- helping professionals who bring people together for mutual support in a variety of settings, including churches, schools, prisons, halfway houses, community mental health centers, senior citizen centers, 12-Step organizations, hospitals;
- paraprofessionals who offer peer counseling through hotlines, crisis centers, student centers;

- self-help and support groups who want to deepen their level of sharing and commitment;
- businesses, non-profit organizations, and political groups who want to incorporate “the intuitive feel,” The Creative Edge, for innovative problem solving;
- those living in spiritual and other residential communities;
- individuals who are looking for their own solution to isolation and loneliness.

The skills described in the manual, and the theory behind them, can be easily comprehended and practiced by any individual or group of individuals who want to create a more intimate and healing environment for themselves.

Every person should have the skills to respond to emotional crisis, to be in touch with and to share his own inner experiencing, to resolve interpersonal conflicts, and to make decisions without conflict. The need for such skills arises constantly in everyday life: in marriage, friendship, the relationship between employer and employee, any attempt of people to meet or work together.

When such skills remain the province of mental health professionals alone, there is a general mystification which leads individuals to feel dependent upon mental health practitioners and, in the most damaging way, to perceive themselves as not responsible for their feelings and actions and their effects upon other people.

I hope through this manual to give confidence and skills to those wishing to understand the psychological and interpersonal phenomena which arise in everyday friendship and work and thereby to empower individuals. I have received some of my own best mental health care and mental health training in support groups and peer counseling groups. I have come to see the core skills of Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening as the basis of “human literacy,” skills of “emotional and social intelligence.”

However, the fact that the manual is addressed to everyone is in no way meant to play down the role of the helping professional in encouraging and fostering the movement toward self-help and individual responsibility. Until individuals have been credited with and supported for their attempts to understand and to take responsibility for their own psychological well-being, it will often be the helping professional who will reach for the manual and who will provide the motivating force behind the establishment of supportive communities.

Teachers, ministers, rabbis, nurses, mental health workers have always had the building of community and of mutually supportive relationships as one of the motivations which draws them into helping kinds of work. As a mental health professional, I have been most deeply affected by the theoretical work of Carl Rogers, Martin Buber and Eugene Gendlin. I find healing through supportive community a natural outgrowth of their existential and client-centered perspectives.

In a number of cases, non-professionals and professionals have come together to combine resources. It is hoped that professionals and non-professionals will often sit

down and go through the manual as equals, each giving and receiving help in the attempt to start a community.

The approach taken in the manual is an experiential one: readers learn how to start a peer counseling community by being part of one. So, whether you are a lay person, a helping professional, or a counseling student, the first steps are the same. You will find a few friends, colleagues, or classmates with whom to read the book and practice the skills involved. When you feel comfortable with the skills and have watched your small group grow into a community, you will be ready to pass this experience on to others, to start additional communities, if this is your desire.

It will take a minimum of ten two-hour meetings to go through the manual and practice the skills basic to a small Listening/Focusing exchange, or Focusing Partnership Group. After this initial small group experience, it might take an additional ten weeks to build the small group into a larger community or to attempt to start another group.

For classroom use, I suggest an Introductory Course, where participants go through the manual and become a peer counseling community among themselves (Boukydis, 1979), followed by a Practicum, where advanced students go out in pairs to start Focusing Groups among populations of their choice. A weekly seminar can be used for additional reading, discussion, and support around issues arising in the field.

## **2. Finding a Core Group**

If you are not reading the manual as part of a classroom or colleague group, here are some suggestions on how to find an initial person or two with whom to read the book and practice the skills involved:

- (a) First, choose the people with whom you feel most able to be yourself, most comfortable, most accepted when you are talking about your feelings. At the beginning, you might want to share the book and practice just with your closest friend; then, after a while, each of you might choose to invite one more person, and so on. Four to six people are an ideal size beginning group.
- (b) Some people are best approached by offering them the book to read and telling them what you liked about it, what was important to you. But it's usually best to avoid too much discussion of theory. It's too easy to argue down a theory. Usually, instead of a lot of discussion, we like to say to someone, "Come on. Let's try it for a few minutes. I'll listen to your (using reflection of feelings) for a while, then you can listen to me."
- (c) There might also arise a time when you realize that you are naturally using reflection of feelings as a friend is sharing feelings with you. It might then be appropriate at the end to say something like, "You know how we are with each other when one of us is hurting, how we just try to listen and not be judgmental. Well, I'm learning a lot about how to do that even more effectively, and I'd like to share it with you."
- (d) Lastly, if there are two of you who have practiced Listening and Focusing together, then you can introduce other people to it by demonstrating with them watching.

Once you have started your small group using Chapter Three, the level of intimacy and mutual concern that arises during Listening/Focusing turns will begin to flow out into other aspects of your lives together. You may find your little core group growing as another couple hears that you can help with interpersonal problems and asks for help. Or you may decide to share the idea with interested persons in your church or synagogue group, in a professional organization, or in any number of ways.

It is important at this point to follow your intuition and to keep the group at the size and level of trust that feels comfortable to the participants. If someone wants to add new members and others want to stay small and cozy, the group will look for creative alternatives—like forming two groups, one cozy, one more open, or whatever alternative you can find that works for everyone.

It's also important not to be hurt or set back because some of your friends or family decide not to be involved after an initial exposure to Listening and Focusing. We were shocked if one of the friends we invited decided not to come again when we started out ten years ago. How could she not be interested in something that had become the very nourishment of our lives?!

However, we have learned over the years to be happy and accepting of anyone who shows an interest and to let the others go without pressure. For whatever reason, a Listening/Focusing Community isn't right for them at this time. Perhaps they will be interested later, as they see us interact with friends in a Listening way. Or perhaps they will always only want to be involved in the most peripheral and informal way. It doesn't help to try to force them or to feel hurt and rejected. And there are always enough people who are interested to provide a supportive group (it only takes one or two!).

There are also many situations in which you might want to start a Listening/Focusing Group that involves people who are not your closest friends or family. Let's say you would like to build a support group where you work, or that you would like to bring the listening approach to your church or your 12-Step group or another kind of self-help group to which you already belong. Or, you may have moved to a new city and be looking for friends!

There are also probably many helping professionals (ministers, teachers, psychiatric nurses, psychologists, persons working with the elderly, prisoners, and mental patients) reading this book who would like to start Listening/Focusing communities as an addition to their work. The following pointers are for these situations:

(a) Whatever your situation, it is best whenever possible to start by sharing Listening and Focusing with one other person. Then, as you go about trying to bring the idea to more people, you can use Listening/Focusing Partnership turns on any feelings that come up. This is especially true when you are trying to bring the idea to people who are new, who don't have years of reasons to trust you and to be willing to try out your ideas.

When you bring the Focusing Partnership idea to people with whom you work, to other professionals, to people (students, clients, those institutionalized for a variety of reasons) who see you as having power over them, all kinds of feelings may arise—competitiveness, suspicion, cynicism, skepticism, fears of feelings and intimacy, insecurity about learning something new, etc. Your best bet is:

- not to force the idea on anyone who doesn't want it, but to proceed to form a group with the few or many who are interested, leaving it open to be joined by others as they wish;
  - to use reflection of feelings to deal with the feelings that come up, rather than arguing or getting pulled into an angry interaction. In this way, you will also be demonstrating the very approach that you are trying to share;
  - to get listened to yourself, either in the group (modeling Focusing) or afterwards, on your own feelings of insecurity, rejection, etc... as they come up
- b) You can proceed in a “strange” situation as you did with your friends—slowly inviting one likely person after the other until you have built a core group. Alternatively, you can find people by doing a demonstration “Listening/Focusing Group”: a short presentation of what Listening and Focusing involve and why they are important to you, then some Focusing Instruction; then a “round robin” where each person has a short turn at both Listening and Focusing. In the round robin, you (or your co-partner, if you have one) start by Listening to the person at your left, to show what Listening is like, then you get listened to by the person on your right, to show how to Focus while being listened to. Then, the next person, beside the person on your right, listens to them, and so on, around the circle with each person getting a turn Listening and being listened to. You can give feedback after each turn. Follow the instructions at the end of Chapter Three. After the demonstration, those who are interested can be invited to further meetings.
- c) However you find your initial people, it's a good idea, once you have gathered a group of four to ten people, to stay in this group for several months, practicing Listening and Focusing, Interpersonal Focusing, and Collaborative Decision Making until they are a natural part of the group. In this way, if you later want to open the group up to “anyone who wants to come”, you will have a core group who already know Listening and Focusing and who can help keep the group oriented around the level of intimacy and empathic concern central to a Listening/Focusing Community.

Sometimes, when new people come into a group they try to change its focus. For instance, people have come into our open groups and argued that we should be more involved in politics, or that they would rather have us be an encounter group than do Listening/Focusing turns. If you have a committed core group, it's easier to say clearly that the central purpose of this group is the exchange of Listening/Focusing turns. If newcomers want some other kind of a group, they can go somewhere else and start it. There may also be the option of presentations on other topics or sub-groups to try out other approaches to personal growth. But always at the core of a Listening/Focusing Community will be the opportunity to learn Listening and Focusing skills and to practice these skills with committed others.

- d) Once you have a committed core, you can expand your group by invitation only, by word-of-mouth, by announcing your group to helping agencies and other self-help groups, by posting up announcement flyers all over town, by mention on the radio or in the newspapers, etc. Your manner of advertising will be suited to the needs and energies of your group.
- e) Once you have a core group who are consistently exchanging Listening/Focusing turns, the other aspect of supportive community will arise naturally. The depth of intimacy and mutual concern generated during Listening turns leads to an attitude of friendship and cooperation that in turn leads to all kinds of community activities (volley ball games, pot luck suppers, trips to the movies, discussion groups, etc.), crisis help during the week, and a consistent commitment to working out conflicts when they occur.
- f) If you are a professional starting a community for some group of clients that you serve, then it is essential either that you be willing to participate in Listening/Focusing turns as an equal, at least during the initial start-up time, or that you choose several volunteers from that population who can be trained in Listening and Focusing and who then can start a group. You will be modeling the Listening/Focusing skills and also giving and receiving help in an egalitarian, self-help context.

If you do not have the time to be involved in all of the communities that you want to start, then perhaps the best approach is to give an initial demonstration workshop to attract some interested people from each population. Then you would spend ten or more weeks being involved with the core group, as everyone practices the skills and reads the manual, if they are able. After this you would be available as a consultant as the core group begins to be open to new members. Alternatively, you can simply give the manual to interested people and they can build their own group, starting with the small Listening/Focusing exchange as described in Chapter Three.

While there are benefits to support groups around the special concerns of a given population, the Listening/Focusing Community model also provides the power for heterogeneous groups of people to come together in an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance of differences. Where it is possible, it is worth considering starting two groups, one for people who all share a particular concern (e.g., parents grieving the loss of a child, persons with a chronic disease, ex-mental patients), and one where people with all kinds of special concerns can be involved in a more heterogeneous Listening/Focusing Community. Or, you can start a heterogeneous Listening/Focusing Community and smaller special “interest” groups may break off for the exchange of Listening/Focusing turns, while everyone shares together in the broader aspects of community meetings.

**REMEMBER:** A professional’s help is not needed to start a Listening/Focusing group. The manual is meant to be used by lay people to start their own groups. Don’t go overboard into thinking that you, as the professional, are indispensable to the process, although, of course, with groups of children or chronic schizophrenics, or others who can’t or won’t read the manual, you may have to play more of a teaching role.

- g) When the first listening communities were started, we learned early on that having any money involved at all quickly led to the kinds of hierarchies and inequalities we were trying to avoid. So, for many years, Listening/Focusing Groups were totally free – no one was paid for starting them, or for doing initial training, or anything. However, after about ten years, some people who were really good at starting communities became tired of doing that over and over again, and, for a while, there were very few communities.

One solution to that problem was the writing of this manual so that people anywhere could start a community for themselves without trainers, and therefore, no money involved. Another solution was for some of the well-practiced starters to invite people to a group and to charge a fee for organizing the meetings and helping people go through the manual and practice the four skills involved. This worked well also, and is a possibility for people who are committed to the Listening/Focusing Community idea, who have started several communities and know they are able to do it, and who want to make some of their money doing something they care about.

Again, as in (d ) above, it is essential to be willing to be involved as an equal, at least during the initial start-up number of sessions, and to set up the group around the principle of shared leadership. However, simply by charging money and being an official starter, rather than giving the manual to interested people and letting them start a group themselves, you will find that you have set up a situation where people look to you as a leader, assume that you know more than they, and begin to lose confidence in your own ability to do the skills perfectly adequately by themselves. So, if you take on this kind of an official “starter” role, you will also have to give special attention and energy to giving this power back to the group, since they will have automatically given it to you.

The idea of reliance upon a “professional” who knows more and is necessary in order for the group to exist is contrary to the idea of peer self-help, where everyone is seen as equally able to give and receive help, and where it is assumed that people are perfectly able to be responsible for themselves. Even if you are the official organizer of the gatherings, it is important that the “prime mover” responsibility (see Ch. 7.3) be rotated around the group so that members know they can run a meeting without you and are not dependent upon you.

- (h) Now that there are certified Focusing Trainers ([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)) all over the world, self-help Changes groups often start as a continuation of a Listening/Focusing Workshop or Class. Participants have had at least 20 hours of experience in Focusing Partnership, the exchange of Listening/Focusing turns, and are well-prepared to carry on after the class with their own, peer-led Focusing Group. This can be ideal. Professionals can play this role in teaching basic skills and helping self-help groups to continue.

There is a listing of existing Changes Groups at [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) under “Felt Community.” Most are open to new members, but many may request that newcomers attend a class or workshop with a certified Focusing Trainer to learn the basic skills.

### 3. **Brief Overview of the Book**

The manual is written in a personal style. It is about feelings, inner experience, and sharing, topics which call forth an intimate approach. The style is experiential: by writing directly to your feelings, instead of only to your head, I hope to invoke in you some of the inner experiences that I am describing, so that you can experience them yourself.

**PART ONE** gives you a basic theoretical orientation to the skills being taught in the book.

**Chapter One** explains how a supportive community is different from psychotherapy and how it can facilitate personal growth.

**Chapter Two** presents an existential theory of meaning based upon the experiencing of feelings is outlined.

**PART TWO** teaches the skills needed in order to start a Listening/Focusing community.

**Chapter Three** teaches Focusing Partnership skills: how to respond to another with Focused Listening and how to use Intuitive Focusing yourself when you are being listened to. In Chapter Three, you will start a small Listening/Focusing exchange with a few other people, the first step in building community.

**Chapter Four** teaches Focusing: being able to “listen” to yourself when you are alone so that you can find new words for the “intuitive feel,” The Creative Edge, and new solutions for old problems.

**Chapter Five** introduces Interpersonal Focusing: ways to use Listening and Focusing to work through interpersonal tensions.

**Chapter Six** shows you how to do collaborative decision-making: how to carry the Listening/Focusing process over into group problem solving situations.

**PART THREE** tells you how to enlarge your Listening/Focusing exchange, or Focusing Partnership Group, into a Focusing Community.

**Chapter Seven** tells you how to run a Focusing Group meeting and how to deal with the special needs of larger communities.

**Chapter Eight** connects you with resources for further training and other people interested in supportive community.

If you follow through the chapters of the manual with several other people, by the end of the book you will have created a Focusing Community shaped to your own particular needs, and learned how to start such a group for other groups of people.

## PART ONE

### THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

#### CHAPTER ONE

#### WHY SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

##### 1. What Is a Supportive Listening/Focusing Community?

A supportive Listening/Focusing Community, also called a "Changes group," is different from other self-help groups (12-Step, Parents Without Partners, cancer support, etc) in that each person has learned empathic listening skills and, through the experience of listening, has learned to accept and value other people as they are (Boukydis, 1984).

Empathic listening is based on the assumption that I can only understand the behavior and words of another if I can see the world from her perspective—to set myself aside and "listen" to how it is for her. Listening skills, and the deep attitude of respect for difference which they engender, diffuse the kinds of argument and conflict which have hindered many attempts of people to come together for mutual support. It is not enough for a group of people to come together with the intention of loving and supporting each other. Special skills are needed to overcome the conflict which will inevitably arise.

In a Listening/Focusing Group or Community, people can call upon their skills in Listening and Focusing, not only to help a friend in crisis, but also to resolve interpersonal conflicts and to aid in non-hierarchical decision-making.

When I talk about "listening" I do not mean a passive process of silently hearing what a person says but the "active" process of reflecting, or paraphrasing, the person's words so that, in hearing herself, she can go more deeply into what she is feeling. Thomas Gordon (1970) calls this "active listening"; Carl Rogers (1951) called it "reflection of feelings" and "empathic understanding". I call it Focused Listening.

At the deepest level, Listening enables you to see the world from another person's perspective and, at the same time, to keep the person company and to support her as she explores her inner world. Focusing, created by Eugene Gendlin (1981), is a way of listening to yourself when you are alone. Listening and Focusing can be for personal growth, creative problem solving, and spiritual exploration. They can also be used to work through interpersonal conflicts and to arrive at collaborative decisions in groups.

Listening and Focusing are not meant to be another kind of therapy but a way of living, of building communities in all walks of life where the expression of feelings, and the depth of meaning gained by living from inward places, can be an integral part of life and work.

A Listening/Focusing Group or Community is a group of people who exchange Listening/Focusing turns, a peer counseling community. At first, people just get together for a couple of hours once a week to practice Listening and Focusing. As friendships grow through the intimacy and caring generated during empathic listening, people begin to call upon each other for Focusing Partnership turns during times of crisis.

The group can be as small as three or four friends who have learned listening/focusing together, or it can be as large as the “Changes” communities established starting in Chicago in 1970 (Gendlin, 1978; Glaser and Gendlin, 1973; Rogers, 1975; Rogers, 1977). Fifteen to thirty people met together on a weekly basis, and the doors were open to anyone in the neighborhood who wanted to learn self-help skills.

Focusing Groups and Communities can be built anywhere that people live or work together: in college dormitories, homes for the elderly, prisons, half-way houses, police forces, college faculties, traditional work places, social change organizations, and non-profit organizations.

Wherever they are begun, they represent an acceptance of vulnerability as a part of human experience, a respect for the creativity inherent in the “intuitive feel,” The Creative Edge, an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition, and a movement toward collaborative decision-making and personal responsibility.

Try to imagine to whom you go if you were really at rock-bottom, in a crisis too big for you to handle: perhaps you have left your husband after an argument, or perhaps you have lost your job. Chances are that the person you would choose would have a lot in common with an “empathic listener”. You would be likely to choose someone you know accepts you the way that you are. But even this person is likely to respond imperfectly—she may try to give you advice, or tell you her own story that is similar. If she were trained in Listening, she would know how to allow you to cry or to give you a chance to find your own solution by reflecting what you say, adding nothing or her own. Such support is the essence of a Listening/Focusing community.

## **2. New models for Community Mental Health**

The medical model locates mental illness as a “sickness” within the individual which then can be treated or “cured”— they will diagnose the “illness” (schizophrenia, neurosis, psychosis, mental retardation) and attempt to cure it using medication and therapy. These approaches do have merit and can certainly improve functioning.

Theorists involved in Listening and Focusing training see emotional difficulties as also often containing a problem of relatedness, an interaction between the individual and her environment, which includes the larger social community as well as the person’s closest associates. If a person is feeling crazy, it can sometimes be true that something is not okay about the way that she is relating to and being related to by significant others.

Some of the difficulty in relating may be because of past disorders in relation with others; some may be because of the present situation. Even so, the cure is not in further isolation at a hospital or medication only but in improved relationship, which often takes the form of the steadfast insistence upon relationship by empathic others. Listening/Focusing Partnership training has been used to improve relationship even in patients with severe mental handicap and mental illness.

While sometimes the difficulty lies in the way the person sees reality, sometimes mental illness has been created by the way in which the environment has been relating to the person—a hostile, highly punishing, present environment can lead a person to feel very crazy. An extreme case of this lack of relatedness between the person and other persons may produce a psychotic-seeming individual.

However, this clashing between one's own perceptions and the views of others happens to all of us, in milder ways, every day as we move around in our society. Feelings of alienation, of loneliness, of being misunderstood and uncared for are certainly not reserved for the "mentally ill" but seem an almost inescapable part of life in our society.

Part of the problem lies in the unresponsiveness of our highly bureaucratized world to individual needs and creativity; another part of it may lie in the fact that each of us, as we live through our own particular set of life experiences, develops a highly personal way of seeing the world which is simply very difficult to share with another.

A third aspect may be that the nature of human experience is such that, even given a whole world supportive of each person's creative strivings, people would still often find themselves in situations where they were having trouble finding the right words for what they were feeling.

As human organisms, we are constantly feeling, on a bodily level, a whole web of complexities of situations we are living in, yet, as conscious persons, we are only able to think about, or make words for, small parts of that whole sense at a time. To be fully participant in, or fully aware of what we are experiencing, we need to set aside some time for careful exploration of the whole complexity of feeling involved. So, without any attribution of illness or even of having "trouble", each human being could probably use some time each week for careful exploration of inner experiencing in an empathic listening context.

If people are not ill but needing to be listened to, if the kind of inter-relatedness that comes from careful listening to the inner perceptions of each person actually prevents the feelings of craziness and alienation in the first place, and if every person, simply by the nature of the complexity of human experiencing, needs some time for careful attention to her own inner experiencing, then the old models of professional psychotherapy for "disturbed" persons are simply not adequate any more. What is needed is a change in the whole context of human relatedness, with each person paying more careful attention to her own inner experiencing and with each of us meeting others

from an assumption that we will have to listen carefully if the other person is to feel truly related to.

A Focusing Group or Focusing Community tries to deal with all sides of the issue. While members continue to pursue jobs and relationships in the larger society, the Listening/Focusing Community provides a smaller group which is sensitive to individual concerns and strivings and which can validate individual effort and perception when the larger society is responding in a punishing way.

At the same time, granting that each of us has our own private way of seeing the world, the Listening/Focusing Group or Community can provide all of its members with the kinds of skills which enable us to share these perceptions with each other. Each person can learn Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening, and people can exchange Focusing Partnership turns with each other every week. Listening friends can also be available at those times when someone comes up against highly punishing structures in the larger society—when an employer or a teacher or a parent insists upon imposing a particular view of reality.

A person can choose to go to a therapist if she wants to undertake a deep exploration of her life from a particular perspective (Psychoanalytic, Client-Centered, Jungian, Gestalt, etc) but a person should not have to seek out a therapist every time a number of crises at one time make life a little hard to deal with. Being overwhelmed by the death of a friend or the loss of a job or the end of a love relationship is normal—all of those are overwhelming situations. Needing some skilled help and support from friends during such a crisis is an essential part of human living.

To siphon all of these opportunities for support and caring into the therapist's office is to further bereave a society already grieving from the lack of intimacy. While therapy has its own place and can be invaluable, in present society the therapy office is fast becoming the only place where people reveal themselves as they really are and where they expect to be received.

The Focusing Group/Community brings these powerful sharings back out into the community where they belong and where they serve to hold people together in mutual support and cooperation (for worried therapists, it should be pointed out that the experience of a Listening/Focusing Community sensitizes people to benefit of psychotherapy and leads many people to use this resource who might not have otherwise, rather than lessening the market for psychotherapy).

### **3. How a Supportive Community Can Help**

I imagine the supportive community as the modern version of the old-fashioned village of my fantasies: a place where each person is known by her name and by her history, where each person is accepted as belonging. In fact, a Listening/Focusing Community is an advance upon the actual old village, because people in a Listening/Focusing Community have learned special skills for seeing things from

another's perspective and for facilitating the articulation of inner experiencing. But the import is the same—Listening/Focusing Community has grown up as a way to meet the need for intimacy and face-to-face contact so easily thwarted by our citified, highly mobile society.

A Listening/Focusing Community can be as simple and small as four close friends who have learned Listening and Focusing skills and who get together once a week to exchange listening turns. They will also be available to each other in times of crisis, as good friends always are, but with the added strength of being comfortable with and able to help during emotional distress. Listening begins to spill over naturally into all kinds of aspects of daily living: more cooperative rules arise at volleyball, it's easier to share around a movie if people know how to listen, tensions about "whose turn it is to pick up the kids" can be worked out empathically. And so a supportive community is born.

A larger community can be open to anyone in the neighborhood who wants to come. Friendships form among subgroups with similar interests, and many different ways of sharing and support, from food coops to volleyball teams, develop. A larger community can also carry a few very heavily disturbed people—people who might otherwise have to be hospitalized. Instructions for starting a Focusing Community are in Chapter Seven.

Here are some examples of how a Focusing Group/Community can be helpful:

- 1) I am attempting to teach school in a newly creative way, giving the children freedom to move and to express their feelings, to touch and be touched. The principal calls me in and says that my methods are not welcome, that I am incompetent, that I am harming the children, that I am an insult to the profession of teaching. She will come to observe my future teaching, and, if it does not improve (if order is not restored), I will be fired. I leave her office overcome with reactions: am I hurting the children? Or am I right in my new idea? Do I care if I get fired? I might never get another job! Shall I confront her or is it more important to learn how to play the game, to function within the structure?

If I belong to a Listening/Focusing Community, I can call and arrange a listening turn, maybe even right now over lunch, maybe in a day or two. I can be assured of a time where the other person will be setting aside all of her own perception and assumptions, advice and judgments, and just trying to help me to make words for and to sort through my own whole complexity of reactions. If it takes me more than an hour, I can call up more people and arrange more listening turns. If I decide to confront, my friends will support me in doing that, maybe arranging to meet with me right after and help me to keep my head together. If I decide to go with the system, they will support me in that. Maybe I'll ask one of them to come to visit my class, to give her perception of how I am with the kids. Maybe one of them will have heard of a job possibility that might offer me more freedom. But, as we move to these suggestions and possible alternative actions, the focus will

always be a listening one, with constant checking on how each feels for me and a belief that I will be able to come up with my own best solution.

- 2) My sister dies. I am overwhelmed with feelings, paralyzed. I manage to call one listening friend. She calls other people, asking them to help me in various ways. She arranges many hours of listening turns for me, a whole team of people who will take turns helping me to work on the grief and anger involved. I also get concrete help in dealing with the situation—someone to make phone calls, a ride to the airport, someone to feed my cats while I am away.
- 3) My husband and I are stuck in a conflict which we can't resolve. We go round and round in argument, nothing getting any clearer. We feel hopeless and like calling the whole thing off. Instead, we can call a neutral friend in our Listening/Focusing Community and ask her to serve as a listening-facilitator for Interpersonal Focusing. She will come and sit down with the two of us, listening empathically first to one of us, then the other. She can help us to hear each other and to sort through the roots of the problem. As we stop arguing and each get a chance to be heard, we recover our warmth for each other and a solution arises.
- 4) I am having a hard time at my job, trying to organize a union despite great opposition from management and some other workers. Almost everyday I have to plan strategy and sort through an array of attacks upon my sanity. My husband is being very supportive of me and listening to me for a while every night, but he is having his own hard time with a project he is working on. He pleads with me to get myself a broader support system, to rely on other people besides him for listening turns so that our relationship won't get swamped. The fact that I can take some of my distress to others keeps our marriage from becoming totally overloaded and allows it to survive during this critical time.

The above are some examples of how a Listening/Focusing Community can help with the everyday crises of a relatively normal, relatively well-functioning person. The bonuses of supportive community for individuals who are more isolated from every-day social contacts, or who are going through an extreme form of crisis, are greatly multiplied. Peer counseling can aid in the life review process and help overcome the isolation of elderly people at a senior citizen center or a nursing home.

Hinterkopf and Brunswick (1975) formed a listening exchange among chronic schizophrenics in a state hospital and found an increase in self-esteem as the patients began to see themselves as helpers, as well as recipients of help. Egendorf (1978) has used supportive community in the treatment of Vietnam veterans. The peer counseling model can add to the depth of support already being given by support groups for every kind of chronic illness, addiction, and bereavement.

The list goes on and on. It seems to me that everyone that I know goes through about three severe crises a year. Even when I go to see a psychotherapist twice a week, I have plenty of need for support spilling over into the rest of the week. My husband and I

have also found several times over that starting a Listening/Focusing Community upon arrival in a new city can quickly provide us with some small group of people with whom we can be intimate, some of whom will become close friends, all of whom can be sources of support in the long and painful process of establishing roots in a new community,

It is amazing how many crises arise in the everyday lives of any group of people over the course of a year, equally amazing how a Focusing Community can lessen the burden of these. Again, the supportive community calls forth an old image: that of the church congregation which rises to meet the needs of fellow members. When a husband has a heart attack, the group rallies rides to the hospital and casseroles and help getting errands done. But friends trained in Listening and Focusing can also offer listening turns, times when the wife can work all the feelings coming up in her and can get more clear on what she needs to do, as well as getting some relief from tension.

In a community based on Listening, because of the attitude toward human living which develops from learning to see things from another's perspective, certain norms begin to take hold which makes it especially easy to ask for help. For one thing, people can be trusted to answer honestly :”Yes”, or “No” to a request—and, if, because of their own needs they have to say “No,” they will usually help to find someone else who can help.

Also, people can accept heavy emotion as a normal part of living, so that a grieving person does not have to isolate herself until the pain is over. I remember numerous occasions were people who were going through heavy loses joined in community activities (a pot-luck dinner, a “moving” party) with the full understanding that they could cry without causing undue reaction if such feelings came up in them,

Thirdly, people begin to use Listening and Focusing to work out their interpersonal conflicts, so that people begin to trust that, if someone is angry with them, the person will come and ask to work it out in a listening way, rather than gossiping privately. This gives everyone involved more freedom to be themselves.

A Focusing Group/ Community generates a level of intimacy and mutual respect which arises only when people share their inner meanings with each other. Because the sharing of inner meanings is closely related to the expression of feeling, the next chapter tries to overcome some of the avoidance of feeling that has arisen in our culture.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEELING AND MEANING

#### 1. An Orientation Toward Inner Experiencing

This book is being written to give people skills for making living more full of meaning. Most of us are caught in a round of TV, movies, chatter, dinner out, after dinner games, work, TV again, that leaves out or missing, the meaning of living—the reason for actually going through our years and doing the things we do.

We have learned to spend our time facing out, interacting with and reacting to the world and others. Now, even in our times of leisure, we “rest” still facing out, as the passive recipients of external stimulation (movies, TV, spectator sports). There is no time or emphasis placed on being turned inward, on resting in a peaceful inner place, where there is no push or pull from outside. As a consequence, most of us have lost touch with our inner experiencing. In fact, we have learned to fear it, to think of inside as being full of hurts and irresolvable problems that are best avoided by a whirl of action. Yet it is in this inner place that meaning is found. It only is the center out of which creative action comes and where real rest can be found.

This book talks about ways of turning inward, of re-finding meaning. It also teaches ways of sharing inner experiences with others, of transforming social time into real interaction, so that being turned inwards does not mean being isolate or alone.

Finding meaning does not mean dropping your whole way of life and taking on a completely different lifestyle. Some people have reacted to meaninglessness by rejecting traditional society and trying religious mysticism or back-to-the-land or consciousness expansion through drugs as possible ways of meaning.

For some people, a new lifestyle can be a valuable next step in growing. For others, it is just the substitution of one external structure for another, with no approach to the personal meanings that are inside. There are a lot of people in the alternate lifestyle movement and in the new Eastern cults who are no nearer to a “centered” way of living than you or I.

The first step, in any form of growth, must be the re-finding of one’s own inner direction which determines, or evaluates, or feels meaning. This takes some hard work or reflecting inward, of looking at old, stuck feeling places and hurts and moving through the grief and anger and pain that are there. This book tells how to begin that work. There is no easy solution—no guru, no magical mantra, no special diet that can do the work for you. But, after this inner sensing is rediscovered, you can use it to choose the one of many possible forms of outward living which will enrich and carry forward your own inner meanings.

There is also now an overwhelming array of “*techniques*” of therapy (bioenergetics, psychic massage, Gestalt dream work, reevaluation counseling, primal therapy, etc), each claiming to be the one true way. As it is with new lifestyles, so it is with therapists and techniques of therapy. Some therapists, who are themselves not in touch with their innermost feeling process, may not be able to aid someone else in this quest for inner meaning. A therapist or technique can be useful to you only insofar as it engages and carries forward your own inner process of meaningfulness. If a particular one does not seem to be connecting with, or making a change in, your inner experiencing, then, at least for this time, it is not the one for you.

On the other hand, there is no one correct approach to personal growth—different approaches can be helpful at different times in this growth process. This book helps you to realize when growth is happening and when it is not. This sense can then be used by you in selecting from the myriads of possible helpful and movement-causing, people and procedures which are available.

It would not be right to imply that living from your center is an easy thing to do. Many people do not do it because it takes some attention and awareness and effort – more effort, perhaps, than letting the world bulldoze over you and determine all of your behavior and your values.

It takes some effort and care to check with yourself and to ask, “Okay, what am I feeling now? What is going on in this situation that makes me feel so terrible?” and try to figure out what you could do to make it different. However, discovering personal value and worth is a pleasant and enriching kind of work, and being out of touch with meaning is a high price to pay for “getting by”.

While the skills taught here involve some willingness to explore old pains and to take responsibility for present behavior, the learning along the way is accompanied by great increases in the intimacy and support that you share with other people. If you are wanting to move away from shallowness and isolation and towards commitment and community, then this book can help you to enrich your life in those ways.

## **2. Feelings are Meanings**

The “meaning” of living, or the “meaning” of a specific situation, rests in the experiencing of that situation, in feeling the joys and sorrows, embarrassments and angers, shyness and warmth implicit in that situation. The meaning of a situation for a particular person is contained in that person’s feelings about the situation.

By carefully making words for these feelings, a person can find out what the situation means to him. If an event (a meeting, a conversation, a love relationship, a death) is lived through with no experiencing of the feelings that are implicit in it, then the meaning of the situation is lost. It becomes a series of behaviors which might just as well have been acted out on film. The participant has no deep sense of having been there, of having been profoundly touched.

You are probably familiar with this “feeling-less-ness” of a day lived through: going from meeting to meeting, from meeting to lunch to meetings again, to home and a dinner with crabby conversations and on to TV, then bed. There is a lack of texture and complexity, a sliding over the surface of living.

A more extreme example is when you see yourself or others living through in a feeling-less way a situation which is fraught with meanings. For instance, you may remember the death of a friend or relative and the way people worked very hard at distancing the feelings, and thus the meaning, of that situation. The same can happen with positive feelings: if you are living out of touch with feelings, you may also not be able to take in the warmth expressed to you by another, to express love, or to appreciate the joy in a situation.

At the other extreme, you may find that you are having feelings when other people act like nothing is going on, that you cry easily at sad events and feel, or even told, that there is something wrong with you, that you’re not strong enough, that you have “too many feelings”. On the contrary, the capacity to feel deeply the meaning implicit in situations (even if that involves often crying during the sad parts of movies!) is a skill and a gift which has been much underrated in our society, where we’ve tried to be strong and to make it through.

Researchers are just now beginning to look at the healing power of tears, especially in relation to the reduction of stresses which lead to physical illness. Psychologists and philosophers are taking seriously the loss of meaning in our society, the “existential neurosis”, and the feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair. Much of this loss of meaning in our culture can be traced to the underplaying of the feeling component.

Eugene Gendlin (*Focusing*, 1981), psychologist and philosopher, speaks very clearly about the relationship between the capacity to feel personal meanings and mental health. He has done research on a concept called “experiencing”. “Experiencing” is the bodily-felt grasp of the meaning implicit in a situation (1962; also see *Philosophy of the Implicit* and other writings at [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) ).

Gendlin found that clients in psychotherapy seem to experience life events in qualitatively different ways, the extremes of which he called “high” vs. “low” experiencing. Using a scale for measuring the depth of experiencing, Gendlin and his co-workers (1968) found that the experiencing level of the client, more than any factors about the type of therapy or the experience of the therapist, was the best predictor of success in psychotherapy.

If the client started out “high” in experiencing (well-able to talk about feelings and to look at situations from the inside, from his own thoughts and feelings about them), then, with the help of the therapist, he was able to work through the issues causing distress and to come out feeling whole again. If the client started out “low” in

experiencing (able to talk about situations only objectively, to describe them from the outside, without any sense of personal involvement), he did not improve during psychotherapy.

Here are some examples of “high” vs. “low” experiencing ways of talking about life situations:

a) YOUR HUSBAND ASKS YOU HOW YOUR DAY WAS

LOW—You report the objective facts:

“Oh, the clothes washer overflowed, and a big mess had to be cleaned up, and Jeremy got into trouble at school and his teacher called up. And he had to come home. And your mother’s been calling about your father’s birthday, and why didn’t you get home on time!”

HIGH – You say what it meant for you; how you feel about it:

“I feel sort of sad and vulnerable today. I had wanted to sit down and spend time thinking and writing and, instead, I found myself spending the whole day just taking care of other people’s catastrophes. It makes me feel scared—scared that I’ll never do anything important or even that I can’t.”

b) YOU MEET A FRIEND FOR LUNCH AFTER A MORNING OF SEVERE STRUGGLE WITH YOUR BOSS. HE ASKS YOU HOW YOU ARE.

LOW – You talk about external things, objects:

“Oh, fine. You know how we were talking about wines last week. Well, I found a fairly good inexpensive red wine. It’s called...”

HIGH – You share some of your inner meanings, even though some of it’s bad:

“Well, it feels good to see you, but I must say I really am having a struggle with my boss at work, and I feel tired or being overlooked. So I really am needing something to change there.”

c) A CLASSMATE CATCHES YOU AFTER THE BIG EXAM. HE SAYS: HOW DID YOU DO?”

LOW –You say the socially acceptable thing, what you think he wants to hear:

“Oh, all right. This teacher is a bum. Question Four was for the birds. How’d you do?”

HIGH – You share what you feel like inside, right then; what the exam meant to you personally:

“You know, I’m really feeling great. I’ve been putting a lot of energy into studying, and I can feel the difference. This time, I had a feeling of

knowing the right answer and just trusting that I would be able to write it down, and I'm feeling real proud of myself"

Perhaps you find yourself saying, as you read these examples: "Who would ever want to talk to anyone who just complains all the time" or "What a bunch of self-pity or, for the last one, "What a braggart!" However, if you think about "low experiencing" conversations that you have had, you will see how stripped of any sharing of positive ("bragging") or negative ("self-pitying") feelings about life experiences, they lose all personal meaning. They cease to be real sharings of yourself with the other person, and they become just an endless string of objective observations about the world and the day's events that could have been said by anybody (talking about the "weather", as we say)

If you have spent hours talking about your life situation in the "low" experiencing manner, going over and over the facts of what has happened to you, then you may have the justifies feeling that talking about yourself doesn't help. This book focuses on exercises and ways of being that allow you to share your inner experience in a "high" experiencing way, a way which insures that something will change.

For people who have learned to adopt an external attitude toward their own life and experience, it provides safe and gentle ways for taking first steps away from objective analysis and toward the expression of inner feelings and thought and the accompanying experience of personal meaningfulness.

### **3. Feelings Are More Than Emotions**

When I talk about "feelings" I am not talking only about "emotions" (like fear, anger, and depression) that can take a person over and make him feel terribly or act irrationally toward another. I am talking about a rich and subtle, non-verbal, sense of the meaning of the emotion, or the situation causing it, to the person. I am not suggesting that you become an overly emotional person, running yourself and manipulating others through wild tears and uncontrollable anger.

I am also not suggesting that you live in depression, crying and the same tears every day, feeling deeply unhappy and sure that nothing will ever change. I am talking about a way of seeing strong emotions as an indicator to you that something important is going on. You can learn to use Focusing on the "intuitive sense" behind the emotion to discover the deep personal meaning contained in it. This kind of feeling includes not just strong emotion but a daily, ongoing, bodily texture of felt meaning as the normal background of living. I call it The Creative Edge, the "something-more-than-words."

It is a kind of subtle felt sense you refer to when you say, "Well, I just have a feeling that something is going to happen" or "How do I feel about my sister's marriage?" or "You just never know how you're going to feel when you wake up in the morning? Or "What do I feel like doing today?" "Intuitive sensing" of this subtle kind is the human being's way of judging or knowing the value of particular situations. It is

another way of knowing than the logical analysis that leads to scientific fact. It is the way of knowing what this situation is to me as the individual person that I am.

If someone dies, let's say in the newspaper or the friend of a friend, you may not feel very much emotion because the person had little intrinsic meaning for you—he was not important in your life, did not touch upon your needs and interrelate with you wants and goals very much. But, if someone dies and you feel moved with emotion, it is because that person, or the situation he symbolized, means something to you. The person or the situation is interwoven with the network of thoughts and beliefs which gives a goal and a direction, a meaning or a purpose to your life.

You may say when your father dies, from your sadness, “OH, I can't go on living. He means so much to me. Everything that is important to me is wrapped up in him”. Or you may have a different feeling, a sadness tinged with joy, a knowing that his time has come and that the meaning of the situation is that he is free, or that he has gone on to another life. Similarly, if you cry because someone dies in a movie, it is because that person, and the fact of his death, means something to you personally in terms of your beliefs. For example, if he was old, and had struggled with God about not wanting to die, then dies, saying “Okay, God, you win,” you may cry because you know that struggle for yourself and feel for yourself the poignancy of the human situation, poised between individual striving and the inevitability of fate.

In either case, the indicator of the meaning of the situation for you is an “intuitive sense”—a feeling of sadness or of joy or of sadness and joy mixed together or whatever it may be. The words for the meaning come to you from right-brain, intuitive sensing, from the place where you allow yourself to experience the feeling. If you cannot “feel,” then you are cut off from the source of the meaning of the situation for you. So, when I encourage you to be open to or to focus on or to express feelings, I am talking about an openness to tears or anger or more subtle “intuitive senses” as a way of discovering, through exploration of the Creative Edge, the personal meanings which give value and direction to your life. It might help to think of “intuitive senses” as “felt meaning”—your feeling of the meaning of the situation to you.

#### **4. Feelings Are Normal**

A way to begin to think about inner meanings and to try to decide how you are relating to yours is by looking at happenings in your life which may be taken as signs that there are a lot of emotions being held under and needing to be explored—signs that a lot of energy is being used up in the control or blockage of emotions, instead of being free to be channeled into creative living. The pity here is not just that you are cut off from feelings, but that you are cut off from the meanings and values which are important to you.

The body can act as a storehouse for important parts of you which have been cut off from awareness and show their presence in sleeplessness, psychosomatic illnesses and

muscular tension. Dreams also contain feelings pressing for recognition. Or you may find yourself just plain depressed, as a way of not feeling.

Some people find themselves lashing out angrily at others when their own insides are not being attended to. In my own case, I have a nagging pain in my right jaw which attacks me in moments of tension and says, “Hey, pay attention to me. I am some part of your living that you are trying to ignore”. Smoking, drinking, taking drugs, overeating are all ways of glossing over , or keeping covered over, the feeling component, or the part of you that feels meaning in your existence.

The experience of felt meaning is subtle enough that you may not exactly have notice that it is missing, unless you have been helped to have a powerful experience of reconnecting with this inner source of energy and direction. If you have been smoking a lot of cigarettes, drinking a loot of coffee, or spending the vast majority of your time in the presence of others (or a TV set), you are probably quite far removed from your bodily feeling sense. You may not even exactly miss it—even to notice the meaninglessness takes a moment of going inside, of quiet inner reflection, which many people fear.

It is tempting to stay at a high level of frenetic energy and unawareness, because it seems scary or painful or demanding in discipline to stop and to do the slow relaxation, the focusing inward which can bring you in touch with meaning again. Yet you may feel an anxiety, a fear that there is something else to living, a fear of dying. It is these feelings of despair that can be relieved by getting back in touch with inner meanings, even if some of these meanings are sad and painful.

Often people assume that feelings are bad. One way people look at it is as “self-pity”. A person will say, “Well, yes, a lot of hard things have happened to me, but I always promised myself that I wouldn’t indulge in self-pity”.

Another belief is that experiencing the feelings is the same as being depressed, and who would voluntarily choose to go around being depressed all day?! And a common one, especially among men, and as taught them by our culture, is “You’ve got to be strong” or “I think it’s important to work these things our alone, to be independent”. If you find yourself holding one of these positions, or some other one, here are some things to know about feelings as the healthy grounded center of your life:

The feelings you have, and the situations you live through, are not independent. Feelings don’t just come from nowhere on their own, and situations don’t go by without leaving feelings. On some level, our bodies are like Geiger counters—attuned to pick up and feel the qualities of mood and emotion that are in the air.

Think of times that you have walked into a room and known that there was tension there and started looking for the source of it: ah, yes, there it is—the boss has yelled at a secretary and is now watching her as she tries to correct her work.

Or you may feel tense without knowing why. Only later do you discover the source of it. For example, you go to a dinner party where you keep feeling tense and trying to figure out what is going wrong. After you leave, you mention the tension to your wife, and she says “Oh, didn’t you know? The Joneses and the Smiths are having this incredible feud.” Your tension releases: “Oh, is that what it was?! Why didn’t anybody tell me and save me all that anguish!?” Or you may simply wake up one morning feeling terribly depressed. Only later do you realize that the feeling came from an event which happened the day before.

Realizing that feelings are a clue to situations in fact gives you a good deal of new control over your life. Instead of feeling struck down by emotions from nowhere, you can learn that, by Focusing on any emotion or subtle “feeling” and asking it, “Where did you come from?”, “What are you all about?”, you can slowly get back to the situation which caused it and look at the personal meaning of that situation. You are then in a position to do something to change that situation in the future, and thereby to change the way you are feeling. So emotions and more intuitive “feelings,” when focused upon, can provide just the information needed to make your life different in the future.

## **5. Feeling is Healing**

Getting in touch with felt, intuitive meaning will involve some experiences of pain and grief and anger. Some of the personal meanings which are contained in the “intuitive feel” are just those which have had to be pushed out of awareness in the past, because they were not valued by other members of the society or because they were associated with punishment or humiliation or powerlessness in the past.

It is important to know that the pain or grief experienced as you allow yourself to reclaim parts of yourself is not new pain which you are bringing upon yourself and which could have been avoided. When you are directly involved in a situation, even if you are not conscious of feeling anything, you experience on a bodily level the meanings that are in that situation.

If you are making a speech, and you trip down the stairs, somewhere inside of you, you will probably experience the embarrassment, no matter how nonchalant you try to appear. The embarrassment does not represent some flaw in your character, but is simply one of the natural, or almost built-in, meanings or implications of that situation. Allowing yourself to acknowledge, or make words for, the feeling is not what makes it hurt. The hurt is already there stored on a bodily level, and allowing yourself to be in touch with it and to express its meaning for you is actually the healing, and not the making, of the hurt or pain.

If you have lived through the death of a child or of a parent, the meaning is already stored for you as hurt on a bodily level – the expression of that hurt, in tears of grief and anger, will be the relief of the bodily pain and the return to you of the enriching meanings of that situation.

Harvey Jackins (1965) the spokesman for re-evaluation co-counseling theory, describes this relationship between feelings and healing eloquently. He says that, as children, we have a natural process for healing hurts, physical or mental, through the expression, rather than the blocking, of feelings.

For instance, when a child is bitten by a dog, if the child is simply held and looked at with warmth and a welcoming of whatever feelings are there, first the child will cry and eventually begin to shake with fear. If all the crying and shaking are allowed to happen, perhaps next will come anger (“Bad doggy to bite little girls”, the child may say). After the anger and tears and shaking, there will be a shift to lighter feelings – there may be the expression of some embarrassment and light fear in the form of laughter (“I must have looked funny with a big dog on my arm!” or “Mommy, I bet you were scared”). And, lastly, if the healing process has been allowed to proceed completely, the child will yawn away the remainder of physical tension and be healed of the emotional damage and ready to go again to play, brightly and curiously.

Expressing feelings is the outward sign of healing hurts already existing. It is not making or intensifying a feeling which could otherwise have been avoided.

## **6. Getting Started**

It might help if I tell how I ever became aware that I was ignoring felt meaning and that I would feel better if I did something about that. Once I found myself in a situation that was critical for me. I was supposed to go on a vacation trip with a friend of mine, and I found myself absolutely unable to bear the thought of going. I realized that I was overwhelmed with a sense of boredom when I was with her, and that days and days alone with that seemed unbearable.

In the past, I would have swallowed all of those feelings and gone anyway. But this time I really felt that I could not do it. And so I told her one day over the dinner table: “I can’t go with you. It would be just too boring, and I couldn’t stand it”. Needless to say, she was extremely hurt and went crying to phone another friend and be told that she wasn’t boring, that she was an okay person (which she was). And I was absolutely certain that I was terrible (and, in a way, I was since there are much more appropriate ways to express negative feelings, some of which you will learn in this book!) and went tearfully and desperately seeking a friend who had given me some sign that she could listen, some indication that she knew something about inside places.

I found this person and sat on the grass in the middle of a field, telling her what I had done and how crazy and bad I was feeling. She took my hands and told me with absolute warmth and earnestness: “I don’t think that you are crazy, I think that you are new and growing and beautiful.” That I was feeling the pain that goes with loosening old structures and growing out of ruts. A most magical feeling –to be told that you are new and growing and beautiful at the very moment when you feel most useless, ugly, and despairing. Had I gone to a hospital at that point, I would probably have been tranquilized

and possibly hospitalized and unfortunately labeled as someone who was in fact falling apart because of the amount of feeling that I was expressing.

My friend was a part of a “Changes” Listening/Focusing community. She became my peer counselor. For an hour each week, she told me as much as she knew about subjective experience and her own difficulties in discovering that she had an inside. She told me about how sleeping and dreaming had been her first step away from an objective, externalized way of experiencing herself.

I particularly remember one early meeting where I came directly from a doctor’s office. Sitting in that office waiting room, I had been aware of a tremendous tension in my face, a way in which I felt that I was on display in this public place and had to hold up just the right face—a tiresome, grueling experience that we all go through, most of the time, every day. I told my friend of the tension, and she said, “Close your eyes and imagine your face the way you would like it to look”. I closed my eyes and saw an image of me, happy, laughing, smiling from real joy, and the tension of my day released in to tears as I allowed myself to feel the sad discrepancy between my wish and the why that I felt right the,

The next steps for me to this inner sensing were simple ones: first, a desperate need for little “naps” where I would get away from everybody for a little while and drop in exhaustion, falling unconscious into the only place where I could get some alone time , some relaxation of the tension I felt in constantly being surrounded by others and outer-directed. Then, I slowly started to be able to begin to remember my dreams during those quiet half-hours—those dream-images to go back to was a potent first step in finding my own inner meanings.

At around the same time, I found that an hour of sensitive massage could also lead me into that inner place. The hands of the other could break through the layers of tension which kept me separated from myself, while I was free of all responsibility for acting or reacting (here, I mean a gentle, all-over, realizing massage, without the threat of pain, which can bring people away from their inner place of rest in defense). Getting back in touch with my physical body was a starting point in getting grounded., in realizing that there was an “inside” to me, a qualitatively different, rich, and peaceful feeling place which I never experienced in my outer-directed living.

But the most powerful and consistent force in this exploration has been my involvement in supportive listening communities. In a Listening/Focusing Community, I have the opportunity of exploring my inner meanings, and finding out what is valuable to me, while I am supported and accepted for the way that I am and that I see the world right now.

The next chapter involves bringing together one or more other people to begin to learn and to practice Listening and Focusing skills. Once people begin exchanging listening turns, supportive community, shaped to my needs of that particular group of people, begins to arise automatically.

## PART TWO

### BASIC SKILLS

#### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE LISTENING/FOCUSING EXCHANGE

##### 1. What is Focused Listening?

The following are the most “simple” instructions I could come up with to help people start trying the new way of relating I call “Focused Listening”. The list of Suggested Readings at the end of the Chapter directs you to some other people’s attempts at explaining empathic, or reflective, listening. The exercises at the end of the Chapter enable you to start practicing Listening with a few other people. You will want to come back to the instructions below many times after you start practicing Listening. You may also want to arrange to attend a Listening/Focusing workshop or to have a Listening/Focusing teacher come to work with your group. Resources are listed in Chapter Eight.

Focused Listening is based on a philosophy which says that, when a person is being unclear on what to do next, or needing help, the best possible thing you can do is to help her find words for the “intuitive feel” of the issue—that being able to symbolize The Creative Edge of confusion or trouble leads to change in that trouble and the possibility for new actions and decisions. Once the person has been able to symbolize in words what is going on inside, solutions and next steps will come from within the person herself. So Focused Listening is used to help the person to find words. The best way to do this is mainly by (In 2007, see the multimedia examples in the Self-Help Package):

- 1) Helping the person to talk and saying back, either in her own words or in a paraphrase of your own, what you have heard her say.
- 2) Then she can check these words against the feelings inside, and
- 3) Try talking again, trying to find better words for those feelings.

Again, you help just by saying back what you have heard her say. It is the process of saying back, and not any advice or opinions or suggestions of your own, which is most powerful as a way of helping the person to find her own words for the experience she is having (as of 2007, see DVD: Listening/Focusing Demonstrations for many examples).

When Listening is successful in helping a person to get words connected with “felt meanings,” the person being listened to has the experience of getting “unstuck”, releasing tension (often tears or anger), and forming some concept for the situations, past and present, which are involved in this feeling in her. She also has the experience of saying feelings which she has been taught to be ashamed of or to fear and of having them received with warm understanding by another person. The Listener has the experience of seeing and understanding the other person without distortion and sharing intimately in his

or her inner world. This “seeing” can be a powerful almost magical experience which may bring tears of recognition, or empathy.

Listening is best done as a sharing between equals, an exchange of Listening/Focusing turns. Each person has a chance at helping and a chance at finding words for her own troubled place. Two people set aside some time (usually from twenty minutes to an hour for each of them), and sit facing each other and close enough to touch if that kind of support arises in the interaction. First, one person talks while the other listens. Then, for the second hour, it’s done the other way around. Listening turns should feel, not like a dreaded “psychotherapy hour”, but a looked-forward-to chance to get some time for yourself, to go inside and get in touch with yourself.

## **2. Four Basic Types of Response (Table 3.1)**

### **1) Pure Reflection (Basic Reflective Listening)**

PURE REFLECTION---SAYING BACK OR PARAPHRASING  
WHAT THE PERSON HAS SAID:

“It sounds like you are saying...” or,  
“You’re saying...” or,  
“The important part in there seems to be...”

You will use this response about three times as often as any of the other types of responses. Sometimes you will say back the exact same words the person said to you. Sometimes you will pick up the underlying sense or emotional meaning of what she is saying and give that back. The assumption is that just hearing back what one has said and going on from there to make more words is the most potent way of finding words for a feeling place. As long as a process of further exploration is going on, simple reflection is sufficient. Other types of responses are used only when reflection is not enough—when the person is going around in circles or seems to have run out of things to say.

First, you need to try to get your inside “clear” so that there is a free space for the other person’s words to fall into. This is the hardest part and means setting aside all your own issues, your preconceptions, your reactions, your needs. It can often only be accomplished by getting yourself “listened to” on the issues which always get in the way, e.g., wanting to perform, feeling defensive if the other person is different from you, being impatient with the other for being stuck in bad places. Once you are really “clear” inside, listening happens almost naturally. You need to learn to discriminate when you are clear and when you are not, and to listen only when you are clear.

Pure Reflection is used as a way of deepening the person’s experiencing, of helping her to get out of her head, or intellectual understanding, and into her feelings about the whole situation.

TABLE 3.1

FOUR BASIC TYPES OF RESPONSE

1. Pure Reflection (Basic Reflective Listening):

Saying back or paraphrasing what the person has said, with an emphasis on reflecting the feeling tone: “It sounds like you’re saying...” or “You are saying...” or “The important part in there seems to be...”

2. Asking for more:

Asking the person to say more about words she has already used; inviting her to go further: “Can you say more about...” or “What did you mean by the word ‘jealousy’?”

3. Intuitive Focusing Invitation:

Inviting the listenee to be quiet and “sense into” the “intuitive feel”:  
“Can you just sit quietly and pay attention to The Creative Edge?”  
“Would it be okay to ‘sit with’ sense of ‘sadness’ and see what comes?”

4. Personal sharings:

Any responses which are your own thoughts, feelings, or intuitions (to be used only in turns longer than twenty minutes and to be used sparingly, followed by a return to reflection of feelings).

It is not enough to simply say back the content being said. It is also essential to reflect back any unsaid feelings from the person's tone of voice (she may sound angry, depressed, excited), her body posture, facial expressions, and gestures (she may look angry, depressed, excited), and your own guesses at what a person in her situation might be feeling (she may say that her mother died when she was very young—you may guess that she might be feeling sad; she may relate a long list of unsatisfying attempts to get her needs met, and you might guess that she may be feeling frustrated).

Reflections of unsaid feelings are always offered only as guesses—the person then can check your guess against her inside feelings and come up with a more accurate word (e.g.: she may say, “No, it’s not ‘frustrated’; it’s more like ‘hopeless’”). Guesses needn’t be right—the important thing is that they lead the person to look at what’s happening in terms of her feelings about it, to ask herself, “Well, if it’s not that, what am I feeling about this?”

Pure Reflection is important—it offers possibilities for growth that do not exist if the listenee just talks on and on without interruption. It enables the person to do something different that she can do alone, to stop circling around and to learn something new. It should be frequent—every sentence or two. A person not used to reflection may just go on and on. It is important to stop her and say back what she is saying whenever you have heard as much as you can hold on to. Otherwise, you will get lost and cease to be in interaction with her, and she will be as alone inside as always.

The interaction is important—it alone can help the person to do something different. So insist upon stopping the person and insist that she stops long enough to hear what you have to say back, even if she acts as though your saying back is not needed by her (this “insisting” would not be cruel or harsh, but more like saying, “I really want to make sure that I am understanding you, so I’d like you to wait a minute while I try to say back what you have said so far.”).

At the other extreme, you need to guard against reflecting too much, saying a lot of details which are not really important to the central meaning of what the person is trying to symbolize. The look on the person's face is your best guide to when you are saying too much—if she looks bored or confused, you may be giving back too much detail and not placing enough emphasis on the meaningful part.

On the other hand, if you condense what she says too much, you may flatten her experiencing, losing important images and aspects. Think of reflections as a way of deepening, of painting the picture of the feeling or events conveyed so that they come back more richly, more potently, and enable the person to go further. It is important that your reflections keep drawing together the whole sense of what the person is laying out—you should give back not just the last thing that the person said, but the way it connects to things said earlier, always helping her to hear the full impact of what she has been saying.

Here are some examples of what a person might say and what a Pure Reflection of it might sound like:

a) LISTENEE: “I want to talk about the situation with my roommate. We used to be really good friends and now we never talk at all. Now she shares everything with the girl across the hall and just ignores me if I try to talk to her. And besides that, she complains about me to other people. I just don’t understand it—we used to share everything and now there’s nothing”.

LISTENER: “So something has really changed in your relationship with your roommate. You used to be really good friends and now there’s nothing—or even maybe that she’s mad at you.”

LISTENEE: “Yeh. Like I just don’t understand it. Yesterday when I asked her to sit down and talk about it, she said she didn’t have time; she had to go to the library. And then I find out that some guy called her up, and she went out with him for a beer! She didn’t have time for me, and then she does that!”

LISTENER: “So you asked for time and there was none, and then she goes out for a beer with this other guy. Sounds pretty humiliating—like a real slap in the face.”

LISTENEE: “No, I wasn’t humiliated. I was just plain pissed—like I wanted to walk right into that bar and bash her right in the face”.

b) LISTENEE: “My mother died when I was very young, and we all just grew up without her. We never had anyone to teach us how to cook or sew—I just never learned any of those things. Or how to make friends or be with boys—we just had to learn all of that ourselves.”

LISTENER: “Sounds sort of sad to do all that growing up without a mother, without anyone to show you what to do”.

LISTENEE: “Yeh. Sad (some tears)...sad, and like lost too early (tears).”

LISTENER: “Sad, and lost too—like you just didn’t know what to do.”

c) LISTENEE: “What a week! First, the washing machine broke down, and you know how it rained all day Tuesday and has been so cold—and you know how my arthritis hurts in the cold—and that party we were supposed to go got called off, and you just can’t trust people anyway—and my husband got called out of town—and I just don’t know how I even managed to get there!”

LISTENER: “So everything has gone wrong this week—the washing machine, the rain and cold and arthritis, no party, and nobody home to help you.

I'm thinking you must be feeling pretty frustrated and bitter and lonely in the midst of all that!"

LISTENEE: "If only my husband had been home to help, then I could have stood all the other things."

LISTENER: "So part of you says: "well, that's to be expected. That's the way life is but I am guessing that maybe there's another part of you that feels sort of cheated, like maybe you should be able to get something, maybe you should be a little bit important?" (This picked up from anger or something in the voice tone).

LISTENEE: "Oh, no, I would never expect that. Live and let live, that's my motto. Who am I to complain—worse things have happened."

LISTENER: "So, mostly you feel "Oh, no, I shouldn't get more. This is the way life is and I might as well just accept it."

LISTENEE: "Yeh. That's right. Live and let live".

You will learn to judge when to say back the exact words that the person has said, and when to paraphrase in your own words or guess at feelings. Your best guide is the look in the face of the other person—if, after your reflection, she looks up at you and says, "Huh?" or "Could you say that again? I didn't understand", that's a pretty good sign that what you said confused her instead of helping her to go on, hoping to capture it better the next time.

On the other hand, she may say, "No. That's not quite right". But go on to say more clearly what it is like. Then you have helped her fine in enabling her to go further into he own experiencing of the situation. And, sometimes, if you say things back in a way that really captures what the person feels, this will make a sigh of tension release in her, a feeling of relief: "Yes, that's what it is. Now I know!"

Other times, if you have really been able to understand her and to see her, this may make tears in both of you and an intense feeling of warmth and love and sharing between you.

## **2) Asking for More**

ASKING FOR MORE = ASKING THE PERSON TO SAY MORE ABOUT WORDS SHE HAS ALREADY SAID; INVITING HER TO GO FURTHER:

"Can you say more about. . ." or "What did you mean by the word 'jealously'?"

You will use this response when it seems like the person has run out of things to say—she has started, you have reflected, it seems like you both understand it, and there

you are—finished after three minutes. Asking for more is again a way of deepening—of helping the person to get beyond the already-known and into a deeper exploration of the meaning or feeling impact of what’s being said. You simply ask the person to say more about a word or phrase which she has used which seemed to have a lot more behind it, to carry a lot of meaning for which new words could be made. Often, it is a word that the person has used over and over so that it seems to stand out like a neon sign, asking to be explored further.

For instance, the person may have listed a long series of events and said several times that it just makes her “furious”, and you have reflected that (“. . .and it just makes you furious!”), and she may just say that again “Oh, I’m just\_furious”. Where do you go from there? You just ask her “Can you say more about being furious?” or “Can you say more about this furiousness?” and that will unlock a whole new series of words which can then be reflected—she may say “Well, it’s like nobody in the whole world cares about me or thinks about me in any way—they just go on obliviously without realizing that they’re affecting me, and I feel totally helpless to get it to stop.”

You reflect “So part of this furiousness is a feeling that nobody cares, that they don’t even realize that they’re hurting you and that makes you feel helpless—that there’s no way to get them to stop”, and you can go on from there with more words and more reflection until the next place where the person seems to have come to an end or to be circling, where you might look for another place to ask for more about so that the person can go deeper and find out more.

Sometimes the person may say a word or phrase which seems to touch upon the place where all the feelings are (that word may bring tears to the person’s eyes) but just go on, sliding over the feelings and getting into another happening or whatever. Since your job is to help the person to get in touch with the feelings connected with what she is saying, it is important to stop her and to bring her back to the words where the feelings were.

Again, you would simply ask for more about the words which made the tears (“Can you say more about the ‘jealousy’?” or “Can you say more about when your father died?”) or maybe even say “It seemed to make you really sad to remember your father. Can you go back and say more about that?”

### **3) Focusing Invitations**

FOCUSING INVITATIONS = INVITING THE LISTENEE TO  
BE QUIET FOR A MOMENT AND JUST HAVE FEELINGS, NOT WORDS:

“Can you just sit quietly and let a feeling come to you?”; “Can you just let those tears come?”; “Let yourself feel that sadness”.

If Pure Reflection and Asking For More are not being sufficient to help the person to go from just talking about to experiencing life events, a specified invitation to “focus”

may be called for. Intuitive Focusing is an activity done by the listenee—it means looking inward and allowing an “intuitive feel,” something-more-than-words, to form, so that the words can then be made from the “intuitive feel” which they are meant to convey.

Intuitive Focusing ([www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com); [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) ) is what you do if I ask you “How are you feeling?” and, instead of automatically answering “fine” or “Alright, I guess”, you really ask yourself “How am I feeling?”, get in touch with the place inside of you where you have “gut” feelings, and carefully make words for the complexity of experience that is there: “Hmmm. . .I’m feeling mostly good, but I have this sort of ‘stuck’ feeling in relation to my work—like I’m just dreading to go back on Monday”.. “Focusing” is also what you are doing when you try to bring back into the present the feeling which you know is connected with a specific past event or situation.

For instance, I may have noticed all week that I had a particular terrible feeling every time I was in a group situation. During my Listening turn, I want to find out more about that feeling, to make words for it. But, before I can make words from the feeling, I have to bring the feeling back—I sit quietly for a moment, turn my attention to those situations, and wait for that same feeling to form right now in the present. I can then use that feeling as a referent to make sure that the words I am coming up with are really relevant to the feeling I have in those situations.

The same thing applies when I decide that I want to get listened to on my old, past, childhood feelings about my father, or school, or whatever—first, I need to sit quietly and let the feeling of that whole situation come to me now, in the present, so that I can make words or it.

Intuitive Focusing is also what I do even when I am trying to choose something to be listened to on—I don’t just start talking but sit quietly and ask myself, “What do I need to work on?” and wait until I can tell from the amount of feeling or stuckness involved what I most need to work on.

Some people have never learned to Focus and do not even have much of a sense of what it means to say, “Look inside and see what you feel about it”. They are not used to “inside” being a place that they would turn to and feel into or converse with. At other times, a person may lose touch with her “intuitive sense” while talking and need help getting back in touch with it.

Focusing Invitations are given when the person seems to keep talking and talking without going deeper, even though you reflect and ask for more. You might say, “Wait. I need you to just be quiet for a minute and just let a feeling come to you,” or “I’d like you to just feel into that anger and see what comes”, or “And how does that whole thing make you feel?” They are also given when the person is using feeling words but not experiencing the feeling.

You might say “Can you just let those tears come?” “Can you let yourself be that anger?” In all cases, they invite the person to find a feeling, or experiential, referent for words to come from, rather than just guessing at meaning or saying what one should feel or do.

Focusing invitations should always be open-ended, just inviting the person to turn to her “intuitive feel” and see what is there. You do not direct the person to answer a specific question because this question comes from you and might not lead her where she needs to go.

Another part of Focusing Invitations is helping the person to stick with one issue until she finds out something new or deeper about it. Often, people go from one issue to the next, saying as much as they already know and then moving on to the next. If you find yourself being bored, this may be what’s happening—the person is just telling old stories, and nothing fresh and new is being found. You need to help the person choose one issue and to feel into it and stay focused upon it until something deeper emerges.

#### **4) Personal Sharings**

PERSONAL SHARINGS = ANY RESPONSES WHICH ARE YOUR OWN THOUGHTS, FEELINGS OR INTUITIONS.

All of the other responses don’t turn the attention towards you but keep it upon trying to understand and to make words for the other person’s inner experience. Your own reactions, opinions, solutions are patiently put aside as you try to help the other person to sort out her own experience—it’s her turn, not yours.

However, sometimes your own thoughts can be appropriately used to try to deepen the other person’s experience. Again, you don’t use them to turn the limelight onto you but because you feel strongly that at that moment they would make an important difference in the experiencing of the other person.

Personal sharings are important for creating a warm relationship between you and the other person, who is sharing a lot. When the power of simple reflection was first discovered, Listeners were told only to reflect, to act as a mirror for the other person and not add anything of their own thoughts and feelings. However, since then, theorists have come to realize this role can be distant and inauthentic in its own way, and to acknowledge the importance of a real, very human relationship to any healing process.

Gendlin (1970) states it well when he points out that a person is not likely to grow when she is coming up against another person who is being “unreal”, playing the role of “objective” mirror. The “inauthenticity” of other people is part of what has hurt the person in the first place, and part of the healing has to be coming against, and interacting with, a “real” other person. The helper must be “authentic”, accurately sharing her own feelings when it would be dishonest, or inauthentic, to keep these hidden. She must be more open and honest and sharing than other people in the person’s

past. So, as Listener, you have permission to share your own thoughts and feelings and perceptions and to try out “hunches” and other techniques of therapy which you think might be helpful.

There is no need to use “personal sharings” at all as long as you and your group are exchanging relatively short (ten to twenty minute) turns. During a short turn, the person being listened to needs the whole time simply to stay in touch with and to make words for her inner experiencing. Anything other than reflection, asking for more, and an occasional focusing invitation will be experienced as an intrusion. In such turns, any “personal sharings” should be given only when the listening turn is over, if at all.

However, when you are competent and comfortable with reflection, and when you move to longer (one-half hour to one hour) Listening/Focusing turns, you may have the occasion to use personal sharings within turns. Using “personal sharings” appropriately is an advanced form of response, for reasons outlined below, and should only be undertaken after at least five weeks practice with the other forms of response.

The way to use personal sharings without losing the essence of the “listening” interaction is to remember that the goal of the session is to help the person to find her own words for her “intuitive sensing.” Reflecting what the other person is saying is still the most potent way of helping the other to do this. Other things can be tried, especially if the person seems stuck and pure Reflection does not seem to be enough. However, after each statement of another kind, it is essential to return to listening—to asking the other how this input is affecting her, what she is feeling now, and to reflect what she says for several steps before departing from Reflection again.

#### RULES OF THUMB:

- (A) FOLLOW EVERY PERSONAL SHARING WITH AN IMMEDIATE RETURN TO REFLECTION OF FEELING
- (B) USE REFLECTION OF FEELING THREE TIMES AS OFTEN AS YOU USE ANY OTHER FORM OF RESPONSE

If you find yourself offering one personal sharing after the other, then you know that you have lost touch with the basic power of Reflection to produce change.

Secondly, allowing personal sharings places responsibility on the Listener to be capable of being open, honest, “authentic”, able to know herself clearly. If your perceptions or feelings are greatly distorted by your own issues and “stucknesses”, then you will be giving inaccurate information to the Listenee.

The way to become “authentic” is by getting listened to a lot yourself, so that you get your own issues and old hurts “cleaned up” and become more and more “clear” and free of distortion or at least able to sense when you are being unclear and to communicate that honestly. Only then can you give feedback which is accurate or be

aware of when your own issues are clouding your ability to be a good listener at a particular time.

Thirdly, you have to become aware of the impossibility of ever being sure that you know what another person is thinking and feeling. You can see behavior, but you can only guess at the person's inner motives or reasons for behaving a certain way. Most often, people place an immediate interpretation on what they see without even knowing it. You may see the person's jaw tighten, but it can only be a guess that she is being angry. However, we tend to say, "I see you being angry, and I'm not sure what that is about", and then you and the person may fight about whether she was angry or not, although you may agree that her jaw tightened.

At this point, the Listening philosophy chooses to say that, if you and the person disagree on what the person is feeling, the person is more "right" than you are. This is, perhaps, an a priori assumption of the Listening philosophy—it can't necessarily be proved. But if the philosophical choice is between saying I am right or the person is right, we side with the person. "Rightness" doesn't mean absolute or objective "rightness"—perhaps this can never be known—but simply that it is the person who is having the inner experiencing and what is "right" for her is what is "real" at this time.

Here, Focused Listening departs from other kinds of therapies, which may say that the therapist, because she is more experienced or because many of a person's motivations are "unconscious", knows better than the client and that her interpretations of the client's behavior are "right".

Listeners believe that other people's inaccurate interpretations of a person's inner experience are what have made that person lose touch with her "intuitive sensing" in the first place—while we may argue "right" and "wrong", we are in agreement that being forced to accept other people's interpretations of your behavior is not healing. Since healing is what we are about, we help the other to learn to trust her own ability to make words for her inner experience and do not become invested in proving to the person that what we see about her is true. We are interested in helping the person to make words for her present experiencing, her "intuitive sensing," The Creative Edge that holds next steps.

This is different from having the person immediately become aware of everything that we can see about her. So I may have a lot of "interpretations" of the person's voice or body posture or gestures which I do not share right now, because they do not seem relevant to the present experiencing that the person is trying to make words for. If the person is presently feeling hurt, my intuition that there is also anger there may be meaningless—it may not make contact with the person's present ability to experience. On the other hand, I may guess at "anger", and the person may say, "Yes. I can find anger in there" and move forward from there. Again, I can guess at anything but must always return to listening to see how my guess affected the person's experiencing, and go with whatever is there.

Focused Listening is the opposite of forcing your interpretations upon the other person—it is an attempt to provide the maximum possibility that the person will learn to find her own words for what she is feeling.

### **Types of Personal Sharings (Table 3.2)**

(a) **Intuitions:** These are ideas or senses you have about feelings or issues or connections which you keep feeling are basic to the other person’s concern but which the person hasn’t mentioned—they involve a “leap” beyond what the person has said rather than being a reflection of the person’s own words or feelings.

Intuitions, because they involve a “leap” in your head, have a good chance of being “wrong” –of not fitting with the person’s experiencing as well as the words she comes up with directly from her feelings. However, especially if you and the person seem to be “stuck”, and she is not moving along through reflection, you can try out an intuition and see if it fits for her. If it doesn’t fit, nothing is lost—you can just drop it and go back to reflection.

#### **Here’s an example of trying out an intuition and what might happen:**

The person has been talking about his hassles with his thesis advisor, and I have been reflecting that. He has placed a lot of emphasis on wanting his advisor to approve of him, to tell him that he’s doing well, even though on the other hand he knows that he doesn’t even like his advisor or even respect his opinions, so why should he care? This incongruity is confusing him, and he’s getting stuck in it, not knowing where to go now.

From my own past experiences, as well as from some theoretical learnings I have had in certain approaches to therapy, I am having a strong sense that the person is stuck because somehow this advisor reminds him of his father, and maybe he’s trying to get the approval he never got from his father from this person, and maybe if he could become aware of this he could let himself mourn the way that he never got that from his dad, feel better for having felt that, and then maybe see his advisor more realistically and get unstuck, maybe by stopping expecting approval and thereby not being disappointed or not twisting himself all around to try and get it.

So I hazard this intuition very simply and very tentatively: “I’m having this sort of sense that maybe in some way your advisor reminds you of your father, and you’re trying to get from him what you never got from your own dad. Does that fit for you?”

One thing that might happen is that the person may say, “Yes. That’s really true” and begin to cry the tears of wanting that approval from his dad. If that happens, I help him to stay with those tears and at some point may reflect what it seems they are about: “So what makes you so sad right now is really remembering how seldom your own dad ever told you that he was being proud of the way that you were, and that you really needed that then?” And the person may make more words for the feeling, and we will continue in a Listening way.

However, it's just as likely that, when I share my "great" intuition, the person will look up at me blankly and say, "Huh? I'm not sure what you mean". If that happens, I may try to say my hunch again in a different way, but it's just as likely that I will sense that it's just not going to be helpful right now, that it's going to pull the person further and further away from his feelings and into trying to understand me, and I may just try to drop the whole thing and help him to get back on the track he was on before I tried my "great" intervention.

I do this by saying something like "Wait. It seems that's just going to confuse you, and I'd like to go back to where you were before, where you were saying that it really amazes you that you are trying so hard to get this guy approval when you don't even like him in the first place. Can we go on from there?", and, hopefully, after focusing in for a moment, the person will be able to get back in touch with that place in him and begin to make more words for it. As long as I can help the person get back to where he was, nothing has been lost, and possibly something has been gained, from my personal sharing.

(b) **Feedback:** These are impressions about the other person, how you see the other person. Again, since these are concocted in your own head, they do not bear the same kind of hold on "rightness" as words which come from the other person's own experience, but, at times, again especially if the person seems stuck and not going further, feedback can have an important impact on the person's experiencing, and again, if it doesn't fit or make a difference for her, you can drop it and go back to reflection.

**Positive feedback:** Telling the person strengths of hers which you see, especially when these seem in real contradiction with the way she sees herself or when she seems to be getting swamped with negative feelings about herself. For example, the person may be overwhelmed with tears, saying "I'm so stupid". You might find yourself wanting to share your different perception of her: "I hear you saying that you feel stupid, but I also want you to know that I find you to be perfectly smart and able".

However, you are not trying to gloss over her present feeling or fix it. Hearing your feedback may allow more tears to come, tears for the person who got told she was stupid. But, if your feedback seems to stop this process of going further into the feeling, if the person says: "I know what you mean but that doesn't stop the bad feeling, "then you need to drop your stance and go back to reflection: "So the important thing right now is that you feel really stupid, and that makes you cry", and the tears, or going further, may be released again.

### **Negative feedback: TO BE USED WITH CAUTION**

Mainly, you are on the person's side, helping her to counter all the hurts she has received from other people. It is not helpful for you to hop on the bandwagon on the other side, e.g., if the person is hurting because she has been told that she is stupid, it is inappropriate for you to say, "Do you think maybe that's true, that you brought it on yourself?" or "I think you act stupid, too".

TABLE 3.2.

TYPES OF PERSONAL SHARINGS

- (a) Intuitions: guesses
- (b) Feedback: perceptions, behavioral observations, both positive and negative
- (c) Positive feelings
- (d) Personal experiences
- (e) Suggestions, advice, opinions

However, if you consistently perceive some way that the other person acts which you feel is getting in her way and should be brought to her attention, you might find an appropriate (when you are feeling pretty warmly connected with the person) time to share this perception and see if it is meaningful or helpful for the person. For instance, if the person always sits back and seems not to be working during sessions, you might share your perception and how you feel about that behavior: “When you lean back like that and smoke cigarettes, I think that you’re not interested and I feel irritated, like ‘Here you’re the one with the problem and I’, doing all the work’. Does that make sense to you?”

The important thing here is to go back to Pure Reflection and hear how your feedback affected the person—maybe she was hurt, maybe she has a different understanding of why she does that, maybe it unleashes an angry piece of negative feedback she has been wanting to give you (e.g., the reason she sits back like that is that she has really been experiencing you being a pompous bore and has given up any hope that you can help her). Your perception is useful only insofar as it helps the other person to go further in exploring her own feelings

The work of Marshall Rosenberg (1979) on non-violent communication is very helpful in learning how to present information in a non-hurtful way. Rosenberg suggests that a communication make careful distinctions between observed behavior, thoughts or interpretations, feelings, and wants.

The most hurtful part of our communication is likely to be the thoughts or interpretations which we make of the other person’s behavior. It helps if we clearly label these as our own creation, not as “facts” about the other person.

Rosenberg suggests the following format for a communication:

“When you do... (behavioral observation)  
I think... (your own thoughts and interpretations),  
And I feel ... (your own feelings).  
I would like it if you could... (your want)”

For the above example, it would be:

“When you lean back and smoke cigarettes (behavior),  
I think you’re not interested in working (interpretation),  
And I feel hurt (feeling).  
I would like to hear what’s going on for you in that situation (want)”.

Here are some more examples:

(a) “Whenever we approach a sad topic, you seem to laugh a lot (behavioral observation), and I think maybe that is keeping you from being able to feel the sadness (interpretation). I feel scared that you won’t get maximum benefit from your turn

(feeling). I'd like you to notice that the next time we share turns and see what you think of it. (want)".

(b) (The person has been talking about shyness, fear that he keeps people away somehow) "I have noticed that, when you come into a group, you tend to sit in the corner with your head down (behavioral observation), and I always think you don't want to talk to anyone, (interpretation). Then I feel hesitant about approaching you (feeling). It would help me if you could sit in the circle and maybe even say 'I'm shy, but I'd welcome being talked to' (want) How does that seem to you?"

See Rosenberg's book for further practice in the difficult business of distinguishing between observations, interpretations and feelings.

If you find yourself wanting to argue and to prove that your perception of the other is more right than the way the person sees it, then you are no longer "listening" and need to ask to process the trouble outside of the listening turn. Giving behavioral observation makes the assumption that you are an objective observer, able to see clearly. If you are feeling a lot of emotion about what the other person is doing and you are not "objective" but "hooked"—something in your past history is interacting with the way the other person is acting to make an interpersonal mess.

If you are "hooked", then you need to arrange to do Interpersonal Focusing (as in Chapter Five), perhaps with a third person present to facilitate. It would be inappropriate in such an emotional situation to attempt to offer an observation about the behavior of the other. You will need an opportunity to explore your feelings as well as to invite the other to do so.

There is so much danger that listeners will confuse behavioral observations with interpretations of the other that I hesitate to bring up the possibility of giving feedback, or even want to make a rule against it! However, I have found in my own work (Boukydis, 1979) that it is often just this kind of sharing which allows something good and powerful to happen between me and the other person, to get our interaction moving again when it has gotten stuck and stale. So I mention it, but include with it the caution that listeners need to get listened to on their own issues continuously so that they can become more and more aware of their own stuck places instead of laying these unconsciously upon the other person.

Here is an example of a behavioral observation and what might happen:

I have been exchanging listening turns with another person for several weeks. I have found myself, almost every time after she leaves having unsettled feelings, like "I don't think she really likes me", or "Maybe I'm not helping her", or "She 's certainly not a very grateful person". When I look at these feelings in me, I find mainly that there is some way that I feel like she is acting as if I'm not helping her, as if everything I do is wrong and she thinks I'm not a very good listener. I'm feeling frustrated, like "I don't want to be with her with all of my good things and constantly have them rejected".

As I stay with that feeling, it seems to connect up with the way that I often try to share warm feelings with this person toward the end of our turns (for instance, saying, “I really liked doing that”, or “I’d like to give you a hug before you go”, or “I’m feeling really warmly toward you in your hard place accompanied by some kind of warm touching). It seems that it’s right then that she says “I don’t think this is helping me!” or “listening is really stupid”, or “What’s the difference if I share my feelings with you or not?” and runs out of the door. So I think, ‘Hmm. Maybe there’s something about my warm feelings that makes her uncomfortable. I’d like to hear more about how that is for her”.

The next time I see her, I try to share this, as honestly and as carefully and as much as my own feeling and not some “fact” about her as I can. I say “I’m finding that after you leave, I have all kinds of frustrated and hurt feelings. I feel like you don’t like me—and I feel real rejected and sort of angry, too, and want to say, “Well, I don’t need this hassle. I’m just not going to be around her anymore’. But then also I feel that I do like what we’re doing together, and I think that you like it, too, so I’m real confused. It seems to have something to do with when I share my warm feelings — right then I experience you as turning cold and distant and leaving really quickly. So I’d like us to look at that—I’d like to hear if what I say makes any sense to you or what’s going on for you in those situations”.

She may say “Yeh. There is something going on there. It really scares me when you try to hug me, and yet I want that hugging more than anything. I’d like to look at that feeling in me more” and I may reflect while she goes deeper and finds some feeling like, “This may bring tears and a whole working through of past hurts from “dishonest huggers and may end in our being able to cry together and hug because we both know that this hug, right here, is for real.

ON THE OTHER HAND, she may say “No, that really doesn’t make any sense to me. I feel fine when I leave here, and I don’t perceive my self as being cold and distant when you hug me”. Here I may either drop my idea saying, “Hmm. Okay; I’ll keep looking at that when that’s happening and see what’s going on in me”, or “hmm. I just don’t know what that is then. Is it okay if I say next time I think it’s happening, and we look at it right then?” and she may say, “Fine. Let’s try that”.

OR we may decide that she will listen to me on my feelings of being rejected, and I may go deeper and find my own stuck places—it maybe that, even when people are being warm, I see them as cold and distant because of my own past hurts, or I just can’t believe that I could be a good listener and am projecting that on her.

The important thing in the above example is that, whatever the trouble is between the two people, it is an interaction—it is as much trouble because of the way I am as because of the way she is. We will both have sides to it, or understandings of what’s going on there and ways in which what we see and feel is based on our own past ways of being with people. We both can probably use a chance to be listened to on how it is for

us—who gets listened to first, whether we both choose to go deeper or not, depends upon mutual agreement. I cannot be sure that she was cold and distant and needs to look at that most urgently. Again, the listening philosophy differs here from some approaches to therapy, which might say that it is only the client who needs to look at her side of the trouble.

It seems important to say that this is another type of personal sharing but that, because of the difficulties of doing it without laying a trip, or false interpretation, upon the other, you should hold off using it until you have had some experience with Interpersonal Focusing and all of the issues involved.

(c) Positive feelings you are having toward the person—again these are not offered haphazardly or to make the person like you or to gloss over her bad feelings. They are offered because they are:

- truly authentic sharings from you and
- seem relevant to the feeling place the person is in.

For instance, if the person has been crying and you have been touched, it might be important to say "I'm feeling very warmly toward you right now, and liking you a whole lot", especially since this statement may go counter the person's fear that crying is bad and may bring out more feeling in her.

(d) Personal experience ("That has happened to me, too"). Sometimes you may find yourself feeling that the person needs to feel less alone, to know that she is not the only person in the world who has ever hated her mother, or make a fool out of herself, or been left by a boyfriend. If you have had similar experience and want to say that, that's okay.

However, it's easy to get lost here in belittling the other person's experience ("Oh, that's nothing. It happens to everyone") or turning the attention to you, so that the listenee almost ends up helping you figure out what to do. The sharing should be done for its possible use to the other person: to increase the warmth between the two of you, to make her feel less alone, to let her hear how you solved it and see if that applies to her.

(e) Suggestions, advice, opinions: Again, there is space for these offered for what they're worth to the listenee but dropped if they seem to distract her from steps in her inner experiencing. For instance, if the person is being listened to on being afraid of being pregnant and not knowing what to do, it may be appropriate at some point to tell her that you know of an excellent doctor that she might see. It would be stupid to keep this good and useful information from her.

But, on the other hand, it may not be information but a chance to feel her scaredness that she needs. The important thing is not to get involved in giving advice or suggestions instead of working with feelings or out of your own anxiety about wanting to fix things. Again, most importantly, if it seems like your offering has pulled the person

outward into trying to understand you and away from her own feeling sense of the problem, then drop the suggestion and return to reflection by saying back the last thing you heard her say.

A REMINDER:

IN SHORT LISTENING TURNS (FIFTEEN MINUTES OR LESS),  
IT'S BEST TO HOLD ALL PERSONAL SHARINGS UNTIL THE  
END, SO THAT THE PERSON CAN USE THE TIME TO GET IN  
TOUCH WITHOUT DISTRACTION.

### **3. How To Be With Feelings**

The listenee may get in touch with tears, anger, fear which have not been allowed to be expressed. These “feelings-without- words” have gotten “stuck,” almost like a bodily block to going any further or acting any differently or even thinking about the situation which is causing the trouble. Part of the power of Focusing to effect change lies in allowing these emotions to be expressed, while paying attention to the deeper “intuitive sensing” which gives meaning and allows a next step to come, instead of just repeating the same “emotion” over and over.

Gendlin (1974) talks about having Focusing as a living forward—not just that the emotions are there and have to get out but more that Focusing upon the felt meanings underlying the emotion is the next step in a blocked process of living. As words or images are created out of the “intuitive feel” underlying the emotion, that whole area of living is “carried forward.” New next steps (thoughts, solutions, actions) are allowed to come forward. So, using Focusing with the “intuitive feel” is going forward, allowing steps to emerge which could not be taken before. It is a change process: the person is now different and new behaviors and thoughts and solutions are able to arise.

The listener does not want to block, or to cut off, the expression of emotions. If your good Listening has helped the person to find the words which release an emotion, then you want to allow that emotion to be “carried forward.” This involves allowing the emotion to be expressed but also gently using Focusing Invitations to invite the Focuser to pay attention to the “intuitive feel,” the “more than words” that underlies the emotion.

If the Focuser begins to cry, just stay there quietly and let the crying happen. Reflection right at the moment of crying may actually interfere with the expression of the emotion and distract the Focuser away from the felt meaning which is already in awareness. It may be enough just to sit quietly or maybe to gently encourage the crying if it seems to be stopping. However, remember the words that made the feeling come, and, if the tears or anger or fear stops, reflect those words again.

For instance, if the person says, “I’m so lonely” and cries, just let the tears come quietly or acknowledge their okayness gently (“It’s okay to cry” or just encouraging with a gentle ‘umhm”). Then, if the tears stop, you might say, “The words that make the tears are about how lonely you’ve been”, and this may allow more tears to come.

However, more importantly, reflecting the words encourages the Focuser to pay attention to the “felt meaning,” the “intuitive feel,” that underlies the emotion. It is not enough to express emotions. It is Focusing upon the deeper meanings, The Creative Edge, which allows change to happen.

A word should be said about touching the person or crying your own tears along with the person, since these are often our most human reactions to being with another in her pain. Of course, touching or holding the person or crying with her is often the most natural response that comes in you as a listener, and this is just fine and can often be the most important part of the powerful sharing which is happening between you. The thing there is to be sensitive to the effect of your tears or touching upon the other person and to notice whether they are enabling Focusing to continue or, for some reason, cutting it off.

For some people, seeing your empathic tears may be the very thing which allows their feeling to be okay, to come forward. But for other people, seeing your tears may interfere—because of the way that they are, they may decide that you are falling apart and that they need to stop crying and come out to help you! If this happens, it often works just to acknowledge this, to try to set your own tears aside, and to say something like “It seems that my tears made you stop crying, and I want you to know that I’m just fine, and I’d like to invite you to go back to your crying place”, perhaps accompanied by a reflection of the words that first allowed the crying to come. Usually, this is all that’s needed to let the person return to expressing the emotion and Focusing upon the deeper “felt meaning.”

The same applies to gentle touching—sometimes, having a hand to hold or some gentle touch on the knee or even someone to hug onto may provide a person with the safety needed to let the tears come fully. However, for other people, even the slightest touch may be not good—they may be able to cry only if they are left totally alone (touching may mean to them that you are pitying them, and they’d rather be strong than let that happen, or whatever). With touching, it is often good to start out really tentatively, only with a slight touch.

If you find that you get overwhelmed with tears whenever the listenee cries (so that in some way it is true that you are falling apart!), then you need to take some time during your own Focusing turns to be listened to on what’s happening for you there, to cry your own backlog of tears or deal with your own fears about feeling tears or anger, so that, as a listener you can become more and more acceptant of (and even excited about) the listenee’s expression of feelings.

#### **4. Putting It All Together**

Here’s a Listening/Focusing turn, using the four different kinds of responses :

Type of  
Response

DIALOGUE

	Listenee	“I never feel good around other people—like I’m really lacking in self-confidence, and it really shows
Reflection:	Listener:	“So the issue you want to work on has to do with self-confidence, with never feeling good around other people and that it really shows”.
	Listenee:	“Like I’ll be feeling contented and then all the sudden I’ll feel real self-conscious, like everyone is looking at me and not liking what they see”.
Reflection	Listener:	“So when this lack of self-confidence happens, You’re real self-conscious—like everyone ‘s looking, and they don’t like what they see”.
	Listenee:	I think the most basic thing is that I just feel ugly”. (Pause)
Asking for More	Listener:	“Can you say more about the “ugliness”?
	Listenee:	“That my face is really ugly—that my skin is Is always breaking out and just looks rough”.
Reflection	Listener:	“So the ugliness is around how your skin is— That your face is always breaking out and looking rough”.
Reflection	Listenee:	“And I feel ugly inside, too—like I’m a selfish, bad person”.
Reflection	Listener:	“So it’s not just your skin, but your inside, too, That’s ugly”.
	Listenee:	“Yeh—that I’m just selfish and bad”.
Reflection	Listener:	“So the ugliness inside has to do with being selfish—selfish and bad”.
	Listenee:	“Yeh.”
Asking for More.	Listener:	“Can you say more about being selfish—how That is?”
	Listenee:	“Well, I try really hard to think about other People and not about myself, but still sometimes People say that I’m selfish—that I didn’t think about them”.
Reflection	Listener:	“So, it’s not so much you who thinks you’re selfish, but what other people say—you even try really hard <u>not</u> to be selfish”.
	Listenee:	“And when I’m feeling that way, then I get real Self-conscious about my skin—like I don’t want anyone to look at me”.
Reflection:	Listener:	“So when you’re believing what someone says and feeling selfish, that’s when you start being aware of your skin and wanting to hide your face—like you are ugly both inside and out”.
Focusing Invitation	Listener:	“Can you stop a minute and just let yourself feel that bad felling, of trying so hard to be good and then believing that, in fact, you’ve been selfish and

bad and ugly?"

Reflection      Listenee:      (Quiet focusing, then tears) "It's so terrible to Think you're all bad and rotten inside". (tears)

                    Listener:      (After pause) "So what's so painful is believing That you are bad and rotten inside and out".

Positive      Listenee:      "Yeh". (more tears)

Feedback      Listener      (After pause) "I'm having a real sense of wanting to tell you that I don't see you as ugly and bad— That I have seen lots of times when you weren't Selfish at all but very caring—and that I think you're pretty, too—on the outside". (gentle touches Listenee on the knee)

Reflection      Listenee:      "But then why do people say I'm ugly?" (more tears)

                    Listener:      (after pause)"So what's still painful in there is that People tell you that you're ugly and selfish, and That's what's so confusing, especially because you're trying not to be selfish".

Reflection      Listenee:      "You know, maybe I need to look at why they say that, what's going on in them. In fact, I feel real angry at them for doing that. Who needs to be told that they're selfish and bad!"

                    Listener:      "So now a feeling of anger is coming—like you Just didn't need that, and why are they telling you That".

Reflection      Listenee:      "It's almost like it's all their own thing, like, just Because I didn't do exactly what they wanted, That's what made them mad!"

                    Listener:      "So now you're thinking that it might not be you at all, that it might be their own selfishness, their own need to get exactly what they want".

Reflection      Listenee:      "Like they're just yelling at me 'Jean, why don't you think of us? Why don't you give us what we need!'"

                    Listener:      "So they keep yelling and yelling at you, saying 'Give us what we need!'"

Reflection      Listenee:      "And it doesn't mater to them alt all what I need— They're the selfish ones!"

Intuition      Listener:      "So it's like they're the ones who never thing about Anybody else—they're the real selfish ones, not You—they never think about what you need. (Silence) I'm having a sense that maybe these people who are yelling at you are your parents? That all of this started when you were really little? Can you see if that fits?"

                    Listenee:      "Hmmm. I'm not sure. Let me just be quiet and

Feel into it for a minute”.

Please note that out of nineteen responses, fourteen (14) were basic listening responses (reflection of feeling), only five (5) were anything else. Remember that the goal is to help the person to make words for her own feelings and that basic reflection of what she is saying is the best way to facilitate that making of words.

### **5. What The Listenee Does: Focusing**

Listening is a two-way process—it involves certain skills of the listenee as well as the listener. It is also a process between peers—the listener will use special skills to help the listenee find “the intuitive feel,” but there is no assumption that she is an “expert” who can do all the fixing. In fact, the listenee is in the best position to do the work of finding words for the “intuitive feel” since she is the one experiencing The Creative Edge, she has much more information to go on than the most skilled listener.

A responsible listenee does most of the work of staying focused on the “intuitive feel”—the listener helps where she is able. The listenee will even tell the listener how to help: “I need you to say that back”, or “No, I’m getting off on a tangent. Let’s go back to . . .”, “or “There is a crying place here somewhere. Let me be quiet for a minute and get hold of it”. The listenee is responsible—she doesn’t just sit and talk and expect the listener to do the work of finding and articulating The Creative Edge.

The main responsibility of the listenee is Intuitive Focusing—constantly staying in touch with the vague, bodily feeling which is the referent for all the words that are coming, knowing when the words are connecting with the “intuitive feel” and when they are just words. There’s no way that the listener can do this better than the listenee—the listener has no “intuitive feel” of “rightness” to go on (See Chapter Four on “Focusing”)

Finding words for the “intuitive feel” is a mysterious process—at the same time that you know what you are sensing very precisely, because you can feel it, you also don’t have the vaguest notion of what you are sensing, because you have no words for it. A Focusing session is like a precarious kind of search in the dark—holding on to this murky “intuitive sense” at all cost, you carefully try to make words for it, testing the words constantly against the “intuitive feel” until you find the ones that “fit”, that make a difference that you can feel, that allow a “stuck” pattern to release and change.

You can’t engage in this process unless you have an “intuitive feel” to work from, so the listenee’s most important task is sitting quietly and letting an “intuitive feel” form, or coming in touch with, or becoming aware of, one that is there. You have to start out with The Creative Edge, the “something-that-is-more-than-words”—starting straight into words without pausing to let the “intuitive feel” come doesn’t work.

How do you Focus? Mainly, by sitting quietly, stopping all the externally-directed activity and thinking that goes with being out in the world, and just being still. It is as if the “intuitive sensing” is there all the time and will emerge if you can just get

quiet enough to become aware of it. Focusing means asking yourself, quietly, “How am I now?” and listening and waiting for a “right-brain” answer to come, as an “intuitive feel.”

It is the opposite of looking out at the Listener and saying, “Tell me what to do”. It is also the opposite of the inner dialogue which we all have most of the time—a critical stream of messages telling us what we should do or feel. It is simply asking yourself, “How do I feel?” and accepting, without censorship, whatever comes before words.

Focusing is difficult and isn’t learned all at once. Partly you learn how to focus by being listened to, by having the Listener say back what she has heard you say and checking those words against your inner sensing (“No, it’s not quite that. It’s more like. . .”), and by trying out her suggestions to sense into certain words that seemed important. The following are some additional aspects of being a responsible listenee (Table 3.3):

(1) Start your turn by sitting quietly for one to three minutes, just turning inwards and getting in touch with the “intuitive feel” that goes with the issue that is needing some change or new discovery. Keep your attention on your insides, the place where you have “intuitions,” not on the listener. Carefully choose a “stuck” place to work on—something that is unclear, that doesn’t feel good, that happens over and over again without changing, that hurts or is confused or is standing in the way of doing what you want to do. Keep your attention turned inwardly, stubbornly holding on to your murky “intuitive feel” and insisting that any words said make a difference in that feeling.

(2) When you have succeeded in getting an “intuitive feel” for an issue, then very carefully try out some tentative words for it: “It feels sort of like I’ve been put down or humiliated, as though I had just gotten started feeling good about myself, and someone just had to come up and squash me”. The Listener will say back: “So it’s almost as though you’re not allowed to feel good—that someone will make sure that you get squashed and put back in your place—humiliated.” Take in those words and check them against the “intuitive feel”—you’ll sense some ways they are right, some ways that there is more to be said or a clarification.

You will find that there are almost always more words there—that the “felt sense,” the “intuitive feel,” is very complex and rich: while you can feel it all at once, it may take many minutes of carefully making words to symbolize it all. Try out these next words in the same tentative way, making sure that they come from The Creative Edge and are some attempt to capture it: “Hmm. It’s not just humiliated—it’s worse than that. It’s as if I have been completely blown apart. That I have become so small that there is real danger that I will disappear”.

Go back and forth in this tentative way until you find the words that feel exactly right, that create an “Ahah!” of tension release. While the word “humiliated” may not have been enough to capture the “intuitive feel,” the words “so small” may exactly capture it and release the tears of hurt that are there. The Listener reflects: “So that is what hurts—being scared that you will disappear”. Now the meaning of the situation is clear—it hurts to be put down because, for you, the feeling that comes is of being so

small that you might really disappear. Getting in touch with this fear may release years of tears of being afraid and small and will allow this whole part of your living to move forward. For another person, being put down may have an entirely different meaning.

(3) If you have found words that release an emotion, allow the emotion to unfold. Stay with the words that made you cry, or have another emotion, instead of stopping yourself or sliding over them to go onto a different issue. However, it is not sufficient to just experience the emotion. Hold on to and go back to that subtle “intuitive feel” of tears coming: “Wait, There’s a crying place there. Let me feel into it”. Say the words or images that come, even if you are usually too ashamed to admit them, so you can check them against the “intuitive feel” until you find symbols that are “just right” and allow a next step to emerge. Be honest—this is your chance to be yourself and be cared about for that. Watch out for all the messages that come in saying, “But you couldn’t be feeling that”, and just say the feelings that are there. Catch yourself saying “Maybe I feel . . .,” or “Perhaps it’s. . .” (just guessing or figuring out logically what you might be feeling) and ask yourself, “But what do I feel” and wait for some words to come from The Creative Edge, the “intuitive feel” that holds the deeper meanings of the emotion.

If you stay with the “felt meaning” underlying the emotion, using Focusing to carefully make words and images that are “just right” in capturing the “intuitive feel, you will see that the emotion changes—you won’t just stay scared forever; instead, after the scaredness is released, the feeling may shift to anger at whoever was invested in making you feel so small now and not likely to disappear. Make words for this new aspect of the “intuitive feel” and go with that, through the same careful steps of making words and hearing them reflected, finding aspects of the “felt meaning,” until the whole murky sense that you started out with feels resolved.

(4) If you get lost, if the words you are saying seem like just words and are no longer connected to the “intuitive feel” you started out with, then just stop talking and use Focusing again—be quiet and let The Creative Edge form again. Start again from there to try to make words for it. Say when the listener is wrong, or when what she is doing is distracting you from The Creative Edge: “No, that’s not it. It’s more like. . .” or “No. That’s going in the wrong direction. I need to stay with. . .” Tell her what you need her to do next: “I need to hear that reflected”, or “Say back the part about. . .”

Always stop yourself and the listener if you get into trying to figure out or looking for solutions and discussing possible pieces of advice – if you start a conversation. You will have only words and no feeling referent, no guide to when you have hit upon the right solution, so it only makes sense to drop all this conversation and go back to finding the feeling and making words, from it.

(5) When you get to ending places of some aspects of the “felt meaning,” then go back to the original “intuitive feel” and check this new place against it: “Is this all? Or is there more there to be discovered?” Keep going until you feel you have gotten to the bottom and feel

**TABLE 3.3**

**HOW TO FOCUS WHILE BEING LISTENED TO**

- 1- Start your turn by sitting quietly for one to three minutes, turning inwards and finding the “intuitive feel,” the “something-that-is-more-than-words,”  
The Creative Edge of right-brain information
2. When you have an “intuitive feel” for an issue, then carefully try out some tentative words for it.  
Check the Listener’s reflection of your words against the “intuitive feel” again, and make more words until you have it just right.
3. When you find words that “fit” the “intuitive sense,” receive whatever comes, non-judgmentally.  
If tears come, be welcoming.
4. If you get lost, just stop talking and Focus again,  
Looking for the “intuitive feel”
5. When you get to ending places, go back to the original felt sense and check with it: “Is this all? Or is there more there to be discovered?”

something change, instead of giving up or pretending you've been helped when nothing has happened yet.

## **6. Listening/Focusing Turns Should Feel Good**

When people first start having Listening/Focusing turns, two concerns often come up. One is a discomfort with always focusing on problems, never talking about happy places. A second is a feeling on certain days of being in a good mood, so not wanting to focus in on a problem and risk losing that good feeling and ending up depressed again. Instead of thinking of Listening/Focusing turns as meaning one has “problems”, with all the connotations of being “sick”, having failed at being happy, etc., it helps me to think of Listening/Focusing turns as a time to work on “stucknesses,” e.g., “Boy, I’m really together and happy in most of my life, but I do have this little stuckness here around losing weight, “or stopping smoking or finding a lover or whatever.

In getting listened to at least once a week, I see myself as clearing out more and more old hurts, leaving me after each hour a little more whole, more together, more happy. I am this really healthy person, each week tackling and throwing out more old things—not a miserable, troubled, “sick” person who “has to” get listened to every week. I look forward to my listening hours—“Oh, some time just for me, where all attention will be on taking care of myself and sorting through the week’s happenings” rather than feeling I am being dragged into therapy to “face up to” my inadequacies.

All of us have a store-house of times that we were humiliated as children or yelled at when we were being most creative, or dismissed as unimportant. It is also true that we get new hurts all the time—boyfriends who leave us, family members who die, unjust grades in school, confrontations with immovable bureaucracy. A listening hour is a good time for recovering from these, too--to throw off the feeling that you were somehow bad or wrong, to “be” the anger which you may not have been able to show or even to feel in the situation, and to get back in touch with your own basic goodness, your own path.

Listening/Focusing turns can also be used to explore positive feelings and experiences, or to articulate creative ideas and innovative solutions from The Creative Edge. So, an “intuitive feel” can be about an idea or work problem, not just an “emotion.”

Expressing emotions, in the presence of an empathic listener, is also not the same as getting depressed, or being brought down or repeating the same old emotion. Discharge of tears, anger, fear, when accompanied by Focusing upon the deeper “felt meaning,” is experienced as energizing—so, if you are in a good mood, you may be in an especially good place to tackle some old hurt and come out feeling even more energized.

Everyone can use, or should I say, deserves, at least an hour a week to be listened to.

## **7. Instructions for Small Group Practice (The Listening Exchange)**

**Step 1 :Round-Robin Practice:** Start with a small group of people (four to six).

**Listening/Focusing Turns:** Go around in a circle, one person focusing in and saying something from what she is feeling (an important issue in her life or just how she is feeling right then about being there, doing this sharing), the person to the right of her saying back what she says, the listenee checking these words inside and saying what comes next, the listener reflecting that. Go back and forth in this way about three times. If the listenee seems to have run out of things to say in less than three steps, the listener can try asking her to “say more” about some part of it that seemed important.

AT THIS EARLY STAGE, STICK WHITH “PURE REFLECTIONS” AND “ASKING FOR MORE”

It’s important not to move on to Focusing Invitations and Personal Sharings until everyone is well-practiced at just hearing what the other is saying and at just holding on to a feeling sense and checking words reflected against it.

**Feedback:** At the end of the turn (about five minutes), first the listenee, and then the listener, say a little about how the experience felt, what felt good, what wasn’t quite right. Other people in the group can comment or give suggestions from the readings, but avoid getting into too much discussion or argument about what happened. The point is to practice, not to get distracted into intellectual conversation (which is all too easy!).

Continue around the circle until everyone has had a turn at both roles. Your group can repeat Step One as often as you like or until you feel ready to move on to Step Two. Step One takes about one-and-one-half hours with four to six people. I would suggest doing it at least three or four times.

### **Step 2 : Dyads**

Pair off in twos and spread out to exchange fifteen minute turns, using just Pure Reflection and Asking For More when the person seems to have run out of things to say. Try out using a Focusing Invitation. Come back together as a group and discuss how it went, where you had trouble, what new things you learned. Consult readings, or memory of things read, for answers to questions. Repeat as often as wanted or needed.

### **Step 3: Triads**

Alternatively, pair off in threes. This is an ideal learning structure, since the third person can act as an observer. Split up the time equally, allowing 10 minute between turns for feedback. Each person takes a turn as listener, listenee, and observer. The observer also keeps time, giving a five-minute warning before the end of a turn.

At the end of a turn, each person gives short feedback, First the listenee says how the turn was for him/her – what was helpful, what could have been different. Then the listener says how it was to be the listener – good feelings from following the others journey, anxiety about remembering, etc. Then, the observer gives feedback, using Table 3.4., Feedback Sheet For Listening Turns, as a guide.

#### **Step 4: Focusing Partnerships**

When you feel ready or interested, pair off in twos who will get together sometime during the week to exchange one-half hour turns. In these turns, listeners can try out Focusing Invitations and Personal Sharings as well as Pure Reflection and Asking For More, but always with the emphasis on helping the listenee to stay with her “intuitive feel,” The Creative Edge, and make words for it. The listenee needs to be sure to go back to Pure Reflection for several steps after each Personal Sharing or Focusing Invitations.

#### **Step 5: Focusing Group Meetings**

When you come together to do Listening/Focusing turns in a small group (set aside two hours), split up the time so that each person will have an equal amount for a listening turn, with five to ten minutes additional in between each turn, for feedback and comments from others besides the two. Take turns keeping time, ending people’s turns on schedule, warning them a minute or two before the end, and moving on to the next turn after limited discussion. Chapter 7.2 gives a format for a group meeting.

Don’t get side-tracked into a lot of discussion with no time for doing. Know that a person can stop at the end of her turn, even if she has been working on heavy feelings. During turns, allow no input from others in the group. At the end of each turn, anyone in the group can say what they saw, ask questions, or offer warm support for the work done.

**Option:** If there are more than four people, or if each person wants a longer turn, you may decide to split into triads and share turns within these, again dividing time equally and making sure that each person who wants to gets a chance both at listening and being listened to. The third person can serve as an observer, giving feedback at the end of the turns. The following page gives a feedback sheet which you can use as a guide when you are observing listening turns (Table 3.4).

It is also a good idea to begin turns with some short, group Focusing Instructions (Chapter Four gives a thorough introduction to Focusing). The instructions can be read to the whole group by one person. In general, they give everyone a chance to step out of the tensions of the day and to choose an issue or a feeling they would like to work on. Table 3.5 gives some short, pre-listening turn Focusing Instructions.

Once you have established your listening exchanges you should meet to exchange turns once a week for at least ten weeks. Since you will be continuing to read the manual and to learn new skills, you might want to schedule in one-half to one hour of time at your listening exchange for discussion of additional chapters of the manual.

Chapter Four follows, with an in-depth discussion of Focusing, especially of how you can use it to “listen to” yourself when you are alone. Any practice of Focusing on your own will also deepen your ability to Focus while you are being listened to by another.

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**TABLE 3.4**

**FEEDBACK SHEET FOR LISTENING TURNS**

Here are some particulars you might want to pay attention to when you are observing listening turns. You can give feedbacks both to the listener and the listenee. Always start by telling the person what was done well; then add possible areas for improvement. Also, talk about specific behaviors, rather than making generalizations.

**1. For the listener:**

- (a) Warmth: Did the listener convey a sense of caring about and being with the other? Or did the listener seem formal and distant? What specific behaviors led you to your opinion?
- (b) Reflections:

Length: Were the reflections detailed enough? Too long?

Frequency: Were the reflections frequent enough? Too often?

Accuracy: Were the reflections accurate? Did the listener mix in her own thoughts too much? Give examples.

Feelings: Did the listener reflect feeling words and/or guess appropriately at the feeling tone? Did she seem comfortable and encouraging of tears and anger, or did she try to cut them off or fail to notice them? Give specific examples.

- (c) Other Types of Response:  
Did the listener use “asking for more” and “focusing invitations” as well as reflections? Did the listener go back to reflection after trying other types of response (three reflections to one of anything else)? Did the listener use “personal sharings” appropriately (at the end of a turn for short turns; followed by reflection within longer turns)?

**2. For the listenee:**

- (a) Self-direction: Did the listenee take responsibility for saying what she needed? Did she let the listener know if something was getting her off the track? Give examples.
- (b) Focusing: Did the listenee make some attempts to sit quietly and feel what was inside? Did she accept or reject focusing invitations from the listener?
- (c) Feelings: Did the listenee let herself experience any tears or anger that came up, or did she try to avoid them? Give specific examples.

### TABLE 3.5

#### PRE-LISTENING TURN FOCUSING INSTRUCTIONS

One person can read the instructions aloud to the group before you split up for listening turns. Everyone else should lie down on the floor, if possible, eyes closed.

WHEN YOU ARE READING, MAKE SURE TO LEAVE AT LEAST ONE MINUTE BETWEEN INSTRUCTIONS. THE FIRST FEW TIMES, TIME YOURSELF:

- “Okay, first just get yourself comfortable. Feel the weight of your body on the floor (or chair).”
- “Notice where you have tension in your body . . . Now, imagine the tension as a stream of water, draining out of your body through your fingertips and feet. . . Flowing down your body and out of your arms and legs. . . Let yourself travel inside of your body to a place of peace.”
- “Now, bring to mind an incident or a situation that was troublesome for you this week. . . Think about it or get a mental image of it”.
- “ Now try to set aside all of your thoughts about the situation, and just try to get a hold feeling you have in that situation. . . Not words, but the feel of yourself in that situation.”
- “Find some words or an image that will help you go back to that feeling in your listening turn, and, when you are ready, open your eyes.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FOCUSING

#### 1. The Basics of Focusing\*

As you begin to get help in finding words for the “intuitive feel” through being listened to, you can begin to give Focusing Instructions to yourself when you are alone. You can start learning to “listen to” yourself. Intuitive Focusing means taking a few minutes to sit down, close your eyes, and look for The Creative Edge. The basics of Focusing Instructions are: (see Table 4.1)

##### STEP ONE: GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR BODY (Relaxation)

First, some form of relaxation instructions to help you get in touch with your body or using the Clearing A Space procedure

##### STEP TWO: GETTING A FELT SENSE (Open-ended question)

Then asking an open-ended question (“How I am?” How am I feeling about this situation?” “What’s going on for me today?”, “What’s the most central issue for me today?”) and waiting, silently, eyes closed, for at least one minute while you allow a “felt sense” of the whole issue to arise inside.

##### STEP THREE: GETTING A FELT SHIFT (Finding A Handle /Resonating)

Next, an attempt to find the right words or an image for the felt sense. You will go back and forth between any words or images that arise and the felt sense until you find the words that are exactly right. If the words or image are right for the feeling, there will be a slight “give” or tension release in the body. This is called a “felt shift” and is the goal of focusing. It may simply be a small tension release, or, sometimes, it will be a large experience of sudden insight, perhaps accompanied by some tears, as you discover what a whole problem was really about.

##### STEP FOUR: REPEATING STEPS TWO AND THREE (Asking/Receiving)

Lastly, especially if you have only had a slight shift after STEP THREE, you will want to go through STEPS TWO AND THREE AGAIN, or even several more times, until you feel a sense of resolution on the issue. You will:

- (a) ask an open-ended question about the words or image that you got at the end of STEP THREE (What’s so important about this for me?”, Why does this have me stuck?”, “How would this have to change for me to feel

- okay?”, “What is this feeling of \_\_\_\_\_?”) and pause to let a felt sense arise in response (STEP TWO),
- (b) then try to find some words or an image that seem exactly right by checking any words that come against the felt sense until there is a sense of fit, a slight release (STEP THREE). Gently receive whatever comes.

## 2. A First Attempt

Stop a moment now to try out the Focusing Instructions below. If you are successful, you should get in touch with the “intuitive feel” of a problem, and then experience some physical relief as the problem shifts inside. The exercises at the end will insure that you learn how to use Focusing successfully:

- a. Close your eyes and sit comfortably, loosening any clothes that are too tight.

(Pause at least one minute)

- b. Now, turn your attention quietly inside, to your own thoughts, feelings, reactions.

(Pause at least one minute)

- c. Breathe deeply for a moment, just watching the feelings and thoughts come and go.

(Pause at least one minute)

- d. Now, set aside all your thinking, and just try to find a quiet place inside.

(Pause at least one minute)

- e. And in that quiet place, ask yourself, “How am I feeling today?” and just wait and see what comes – not words, but a feel for your whole day.

(Pause at least one minute)

- f. Gently try to find some words or an image that are just right for the feeling. If they are just right, you should feel some slight tension release in your body, some slight shift in this problem.

(Pause at least one minute)

- g. Now ask yourself, “What’s so hard about this for me?” and again, wait for a bodily feeling to form.

(Pause at least one minute)

- h. Again, try to make words or an image that are just right.

(Pause at least one minute)

- i. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Did anything change inside? If not, you might have to take several more steps, asking an open-ended question, waiting for a new “intuitive feel” to form, then finding words that are “just right” in capturing it. You should feel a slight tension release in your body every time you find the right words for The Creative Edge, and, eventually, a larger shift, or some sense of resolution and change in the problem at hand.

### **3. Noticing the Need for Focusing**

Focusing, unlike sitting down for a Listening/Focusing turn, is something that you can do all day long, once you learn to notice the need for it. It is useful when you feel out of sorts – when you have a sense that something is going on inside and is affecting the way you feel and act, but you don’t know exactly what is bothering you in this way. It is also useful for exploring creative blocks, positive experiences, new ideas.

You may wake up in the morning feeling depressed and go through the day feeling that way: low in energy and sleeping a lot or snapping at everyone who comes your way or going through a lot of hours without being able to say what you have done. It is an important step just to notice that you are feeling or acting “out of sorts.”

Many people have lost the ability to take this step of considering how they are feeling or watching how they are acting – everyone else knows that a certain person is uncomfortable to be around or a crab, but the person is not even aware of it. The first step of Focusing is simply relearning to notice how you are feeling.

Often, this noticing can only be done if you take a few minutes out of a busy day to relax. So often, the first step of Focusing is a decision to take a moment to relax in order to find out how you are feeling. Later in this Chapter, there are some examples of methods of relaxation that you can use, once you have acknowledged the need for it.

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\*“Focusing” is further described in Eugene T. Gendlin’s book, *Focusing* (Bantam,1981). He breaks Focusing down into six steps: 1. Clearing A Space, 2. Getting A Felt Sense, 3. Finding A Handle, 4. Resonating and Checking, 5. Asking, 6. Receiving. Dr. McGuire’s early description above combines several steps under the same name. She has now, in 2007, added Gendlin’s step names in parentheses where needed.

## TABLE 4.1

### THE BASICS OF FOCUSING\*

**STEP ONE: GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR BODY (Clearing)**

Relaxation exercise or Clearing A Space

**STEP TWO: GETTING A FELT SENSE (Getting A Felt Sense)**

Ask AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION (“How am I today?”; “What’s happening for me right now?”; “What am I feeling?”) And wait and see what comes.

**STEP THREE: GETTING A FELT SHIFT (Find A Handle/Resonate)**

Find some words or an image for the feeling. Go back and Forth between the words and the feeling until you find the Words that are just right for the feeling. You should feel A small, or a large, shift and tension release (perhaps Accompanied by tears) when the words fit the feeling exactly

**STEP FOUR: REPEATING TWO AND THREE (Asking/Receiving)**

If you’d like to go further, start again by  
---asking an open-ended question (Why is this so hard?”; “Why does that make me cry?”; “What could make this feel different?”) and waiting to see what comes

---finding exactly the right words or image for the feeling.  
Repeat Steps Two and Three as often as you like, or until the issue feels resolved inside.

\*Gendlin’s six steps, from *Focusing* (Bantam, 1981) are in **(parenthesis)**

#### 4. Getting a Felt Sense of the Trouble

The “intuitive feel” that you have about situations comes in a bodily way, without words. You can be feeling sad or scared or tense without being aware of it. You will be carrying that feeling in your body.

It takes a moment of quiet turning toward your body, a moment without words, to “get in touch with” or to make words for the “intuitive feel.” The Creative Edge. We say that these feelings are “unconscious” – but, in fact, they are not totally out of awareness. We often know that they are there, in a bodily way. We are aware of them, but we don’t have any words for them.

Think about what it means when you say, “I’m out of touch today” or “I’m spaced out”. It doesn’t mean that you’re not feeling anything; in fact, it indicates that you are feeling something going on below the level of consciousness – you know it’s there because you can feel it bodily; you just don’t know what it is or what to do about it. It is this subtle ongoingness of feeling that is called a “felt sense” or “intuitive feel.” You might call it the bodily feel of what is unconscious at that moment. It is to this “felt sense” that you refer in Focusing. It is The Creative Edge holding solutions.

Focusing depends upon a belief that you yourself can change the mood you’re in. You need no longer be a victim to your feelings. At the same time, you become responsible for being aware of what you are feeling and not allowing your feelings to be expressed “unconsciously” – as crabbiness or sour grapes or spacey energy. This belief is premised on the theory that moods, as tensions within the body, are actually parts of present experiencing that are being ignored. Because they are present in a bodily way, they can be brought into awareness if a moment is taken to attend to the “intuitive feel.”

It is true, as the psychoanalysts say, that many of our present moods and problems are caused by past experiences which have strongly affected our interpretation of present events. But the only pasts events that are important in this way (as shapers of the perception of present reality) are those which are in the body presently. In that sense, they are not past (far away and hard to find), but they are present – functioning right now as part of the way that your body feels in a certain situation.

Gendlin (1962) points out that the “unconscious” that Freud talked about is not some mysterious, locked away and had to find place inside, but only the body.

Those things that are relevant to a situation but are not presently being verbalized in awareness are still present in a bodily way. In order to get in touch with what is functioning “unconsciously” in a present situation, one need only attend to the bodily feel of the situation (the felt sense) and let words arise from it.

The second step of Focusing is this turning toward the body: asking your bodily experiencing, “What’s going on with you?” and allowing a “felt sense” of the problem to form. For instance, if you notice that you’re depressed, you might say, “Wow, am I ever depressed today. What is that?” and quietly attend to the whole bodily feeling of depression, trying to get a sense from your body of what the depression is about. Or you might notice and say, “Boy, am I even crabby today. What’s going on with me?” and, again, turn your attention quietly to your “intuitive feel” of that crabbiness and try to make words for it, gaining new information to add to all of the things about yourself that day of which you are already aware.

Often, when we think of the “unconscious”, we think of another person inside of us who will talk if we will only listen. It would be nice if there were a second person inside of us, waiting to talk if we would only listen. Unfortunately, getting words for the “intuitive feel” is slightly more complex than just tuning into a second voice and expecting it to talk. When you turn your attention toward your “mood”, or toward the part of yourself that hasn’t been heard yet, what you find there is, not a voice but The Creative Edge, an “intuitive feel” without words.

You find only the way that your body is carrying the trouble: the subtle bodily registration that, yes, there is something there that hasn’t been grasped yet. You will find the “depression” as a subtle feeling place, a little gathering together of energy, a lump of feeling that doesn’t have words yet, an “intuitive feel.” So you might just say, “Oh, yeah. That”. This lump of “feeling” is the “felt sense” of the trouble from which solutions will unfold. Staying with it, gently, is the most important step of Focusing.

The “felt sense” is not always there all at once when you turn your attention inward. It’s as though all the feeling information were spread thinly throughout your body until you stop and take the time to let the “intuitive feel” form. Then, during that quiet moment, the information that is spread out moves towards the center, as though it were being attracted by a magnet, and into the “felt sense”, “the intuitive feel,” which becomes clearer and stronger as you wait quietly.

While a “felt sense” is inside of you, it is not concretely located in the muscle or organs or bones. It is not the same as the tense feeling in a muscle, the knot in one’s stomach, the clenched jaw, although it is about all of these bodily manifested tensions. The “intuitive feel” is more global than these specific tensions. It is more like a subtle gathering together of energy that can fill the whole space from your neck to your stomach. While it is very subtle, and not concretely located in any solid part of your body, the felt sense is also very real. It can be felt. You will know whether you have come upon it or are still looking for it. It is felt as a slight thickening of “intuition” inside, somewhat of the texture of a cloud or a mist, The Creative Edge.

While your Focusing may often start with the noticing of a tense muscle in your body, getting a felt sense, an “intuitive feel,” is not the same as intensifying the tension in that body muscle. Instead, you would ask yourself, “Hm. What is that tension in my neck all about?” and then look for an “intuitive feel” of the whole issue to form

somewhere in the space between your neck and stomach. It will not be the same as the concrete tense muscle in your neck.

It will be an intuitive sense of the whole issue that is related to the tension in your neck. As you try to “make words” for this whole body sense of the issue, you should eventually get a felt shift and find that the tension in your neck has released as well.

A felt sense is like a dew-covered flower, mist on a river, a many faceted jewel, the ripples on a pond as they might feel to the pond. Although the inner experience of a felt sense is almost impossible to describe, the “intuitive feel” is not just an idea or a theoretical concept. It is a gathering together of energy, a coming together of “intuitive sensing” into an intensity that you can feel, just as discretely as you can feel your elbow on a table or your heart beating. When you are first trying to learn to notice the “intuitive feel” and let it form and intensify, it may be like watching an inner radar screen and waiting for a form to emerge, or developing a photographic image. But once you have experienced The Creative Edge, then it will become easy to know when you have got one, or when you need to relax and wait longer for one to form.

##### **5. The Felt Shift (Gendlin’s Steps of Finding A Handle and Resonating)**

After you have allowed an “intuitive feel” of the problem to form, the next step of Focusing involves finding some words or an image that are exactly right for the felt sense, for example, “Hm. Seems like I’m feeling scared”. If the words are right, there will be a slight give in the felt sense, a subtle feeling of resonance, a slight release of bodily tension. This is the “felt shift”. Then you can ask another open-ended question, again gently and with absolutely non-judgmental curiosity: “Oh.Scared. What’s that all about?”

Again, you must be willing to wait patiently for an “intuitive feel” to form, and then to search for the correct words to say what that “felt sense” is about: “Hm. I think it’s about that talk I had with my mother. Some way that she sounded desperate.” Again, if the words are right, there will be a slight tension release inside. An internal Listening process goes on, the conscious side asking, waiting for a felt sense, and then carefully looking for the right words for the “intuitive feel,” until, as in a regular listening turn, finally the right words are found and something shifts inside.

Finding words for the “intuitive feel” is a very patient exercise. It’s the same as when you are trying to identify the flavor of a particular ingredient in a pie. Each time you find words, you have to check them against the particular taste. The taste is the important thing to hang on to as a judge of your guesses. Otherwise, you could guess forever without having any inner referent for knowing what is right. You have to find the words for the felt sense. “What is this?” you ask yourself, or “Is it this?” (Is it cinnamon?); “Am I depressed about my grades?”) and then check that possibility against the subtle lump of “intuition” and see if it’s exactly right.

You are looking for the same sense of bodily relief that comes when you can finally name the subtle flavor that you have been tasting: “Is it cinnamon?” No, you know it’s not cinnamon. “Is it nutmeg?” No, it’s not nutmeg. “Oh, it’s allspice!” Yeah, that’s it. It’s allspice, and that whole tension of not knowing is dissolved. Your body feels different; less tense; clearer.

The same with your subtle “intuitive feel” of “unconscious” trouble. You ask, “Is it about this?” and see if something in your body releases. “Is it my grades?” No. Nothing happens. “Is it my boyfriend?” Nope. Not the right words. “Oh, yes. It’s about my parents – that phone call I got yesterday”, and there is a flood of relief from finally knowing, a relaxation; “I am depressed today because I still haven’t dealt with my uncomfortable feelings with my parents. So I’d better spend some time soon dealing with that, figuring out what went wrong, deciding what to do”.

Not dealing with the issue doesn’t do away with it; it just turns it into something that is preverbal but nagging: a “depression”, “crabbiness”, a “bad mood”.

WARNING: “Focusing is different from other unsuccessful ways of “Figuring out” your problems with words only because, in Focusing, you stop to get a “felt sense,” an “intuitive feel,” before you make words.

In the other ways of figuring out, that go around and around and never get anywhere, there is no pause to let a “felt sense” form, to get an “intuitive feel” for the “unconscious”, and only then attempt to find words that are exactly right. Getting the “felt sense” is what’s new and can’t be skipped over. The “intuitive feel,” The Creative Edge, contains the “unconscious”, or not yet known, from which something new can come up which will change the problem. Every time you find words, you have to check them against the “intuitive feel” and let it tell you, by the sense of release or shift, whether they are right.

A “felt shift” is not necessarily a solution to the problem. You may still have to figure out what to do to change the situation, but you will be relieved because at least you will know what you are dealing with. The issue will no longer be pulling at you in a bodily way (unconsciously) but will be out in the open. The issue will also be changed somehow. A new step has been taken inside. Some new information has been added to the puzzle. The whole configuration has changed, and all kinds of new possibilities can arise. It’s sort of the way it is when you gently turn a kaleidoscope. A slight turn allows a whole new pattern to arise from the many colored pieces. A felt shift is something like that – a slight, or sometimes a large, release of bodily tension followed by a new way of seeing the problem.

Something that was frozen is unfrozen and has streamed back to become part of the whole, and the whole looks different because of it. Once you can have a “felt shift” on some problem that has you stuck (and “stuck” is felt very much as a bodily tension or discomfort), new possibilities for action and solution arise – ways of dealing

with the situation which you could not see or act on before, because you (and your body as the storehouse of old memories) were “hung up” on some particular aspect of it.

For instance, in the above example, the word for the bodily shift in the tension and discomfort might have sounded something like this: “OH, that’s it! I’m afraid that my father is sick, and my mother isn’t telling me. That’s what I’m afraid I was picking up in her voice!” This certainly isn’t a pleasant thought, nor is it a solution to the problem, yet the relief is there. The relief comes from being able to put words to the vague discomfort or fear that had been picked up on a preverbal (or unconscious) level: “Oh, that’s what’s bothering me”. And it is clear also that, now that the problem has been identified, problem solving can begin: “I’m going to call back and ask her” or “Can I think of any other reason that she might have been sounding strange on the phone?”

It’s around the discovery of felt senses and felt shifts that everything I said about feelings and meaning in Chapter Two comes to bear. The “intuitive feel” can contain emotions. The right words that allow the “felt shift” to happen also often bring tears to your eyes. The whole subtle lump of “intuitive sensing” that is the felt sense can have to do with meanings that have been ignored in the past. Since our culture has not supported us around our expression of tears, our showing of the gentle and compassionate side, it is often just these aspects that are found in the felt sense. Why was it so hard for the young man to figure out the tension in his mother’s voice? Partly because to acknowledge that his father could get sick and die and that it would matter to him (would make him cry!) means moving toward that lump of feeling and having some of those tears of care now.

However, consider how this would feel if it were about you and your father. Yes, there would be a lump of feeling there, and some tears, but the tears would actually feel good, if they could be experienced non-judgmentally. As the tears come, and in that lump in the throat and chest, there is a tremendous warmth. As the tears fall a little, the lump melts and the warmth spreads through the throat and chest. What is being experienced is in fact the feeling of love and care. If the lump of feeling cannot be approached, then the felt sense, the subtle meaning, the feeling of care is lost.

Often, a felt shift doesn’t involve tears. There is just a large or small feeling of relief, of “Ah, hah! So that’s it”, as when you are trying to maneuver a large piece of furniture through a doorway and suddenly it goes! However, it is important to go toward any lump of tearful feeling that comes up in focusing because the feeling holds the meaning. We use these words in our common language, that, when something is meaningful, it makes us cry. Now it is time to carry this knowledge into our way of being with our own inner meanings. So, if it feels like something will make you cry in Focusing, go toward it, gently, and not away, and very carefully try to make words for it, so that the feeling can open, and the meaning can be recovered.

**6. The Fourth Step of Focusing: Repeating Steps Two and Three (Gendlin’s Steps of Asking and Receiving)**

Sometimes, more than one “felt shift” in a feeling is needed before the way is clear enough for finding solutions. If this is the case, you can take more steps of focusing. For instance, you might try to get an “intuitive feel” of the scaredness about your father: “What would be so bad if Dad were sick?”, attend to the body sense of that fear, and find words for it. This deeper step of Focusing may bring up memories from the past which are related to the present situation.

Instead of taking more Focusing steps at the moment, you might arrange to have a friend listen to you on the matter later. Listening is actually Focusing out loud. The other person reflects what you say, and you check that against the felt sense, again with the goal of having a felt shift, of finding exactly the words which release the feeling from the body and bring it into consciousness. While some people are very comfortable with Focusing inside of themselves, many others have a great deal of difficulty with staying inside more than one or two focusing questions.

For these people, Focusing on their own may be used just long enough to get words for the sense of the problem (one time through Steps One to Three). Then they will arrange to have a Focused Listening turn as soon as possible to go deeper and have the felt sense carried through several steps or shifts. While they wait for a chance to get listened to, the fact that they have brought the feeling issue into awareness will already have released the bodily discomfort, allowing them to set the problem solving side until later.

## **7. Exercises for The First Step of Focusing: Relaxation**

It will make the following exercises easier if you read the instructions into a tape recorder first, so that you can play the taped instructions back to yourself as often as you wish. So, if you have access to a tape recorder, have some empty tapes on hand: four or five 60-minute tapes (30 minutes per side) would be adequate. **(In 2007, these and other instructions are on the 2-CD set, Intuitive Focusing Instructions, purchased along with the manual as part of the Self-Help Package at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com) -- if you purchased the package, you don't have to tape them)**

In order to Focus, you first have to be able and willing to spend some time just being quietly inside of yourself, paying attention to and enjoying your own inner flow of images, thoughts, ideas, feelings. As a first introduction (or re-introduction) to inside, I ask you just to spend a quiet ten to fifteen minutes per day being with yourself. There is no demand that you do anything much. It may be enough to sit in a chair and daydream for a while. I have also included some more structured suggestions of how to spend the time with yourself. But the central concern is simply to spend ten minutes inside of yourself.

The most important way to insure a pleasant journey inside is by realizing that you are not meant to judge your inner contents but merely to notice them.

You want to approach yourself in a completely non-judgmental way, saying, “Hm. What’s going on in me today?” You are not to make this quiet time one more task to be accomplished. It is meant to be a time simply for noticing – for getting with yourself in a friendly way. You may already be doing some of this quiet noticing – while you are driving or doing the dishes or cooking; in a hot bath or a sauna; while jogging. Meditation, yoga, and massage are all more formal ways of allowing yourself some peaceful time inside. By all means, structure as many of these kinds of activities into your life as you can.

The following are some relaxation suggestions that you can use for initial practice. Once you get the idea, you will be able to make up your own.

Remember, this whole book is about taking time to recover inner meanings so that your life and the lives of those that you help can be full of richness and so that this inner richness can be shared with others in the building of community. If you are not willing to take ten minutes a day to be with your own insides, or if you think that such time would be silly or self-indulgent, then you have not yet understood or accepted the message in Chapter Two – that the way to meaning is through paying attention to your inner experiences and feelings – the part of you that is not conditioned by the society and that is your own uniquely created “self”

## **RELAXATION SUGGESTIONS**

Do one a day for at least a week, taking ten to fifteen minutes per day. Before you begin, you may want to read all of the instructions into the tape recorder so that you can play them back to yourself later. Use a gentle, slowly-paced voice, leaving ONE MINUTE between parts of the instruction.(If you have purchased the CD set, do one track of Pre-Focusing Practice: Relaxation per session.

**REMEMBER; IN ALL OF THE EXERCISES TO FOLLOW, WHEN READING THE INSTRUCTIONS, PAUSE FOR ONE MINUTE AFTER EACH PART OF THE INSTRUCTIONS** The quiet time between instructions is needed for Focusing.

- (a) - Lie down and make yourself comfortable
  - Massage your own neck and face, making small circles with your fingertips over small areas at a time. Find at least five different spots on your neck and five on your face to massage in this way. Feel the tension leaving.
  - Stretch your whole body three times, reaching your arms out over your head, arching your back, and pointing your toes. After each stretch, collapse into the floor and breath deeply, relaxing.

- Now, just lie there and notice your breathing. Don't try to change it, but just notice the breath going in and out for a few minutes.
  - Now, begin to notice any thoughts or pictures you are having. JUST NOTICE THEM. If you realize that you have started thinking about something and are trying to solve a problem or have started worrying about something, just allow yourself to leave that thought and to come back to noticing your breath.
  - Massage any parts of your body that seem tense or uncomfortable.
  - Stretch one more time, and get up when you are ready.
- (b)
- Lie down and get comfortable.
  - Stretch three times.
  - Now, imagine yourself at the ocean...See the wide, sweeping beach of white, crystalline sand. . .warm and smooth. . .hear the waves rolling in. . .blue-green with creamy white caps. . .lapping at the sand . . .lie down in the warm sand. . .feel its warmth all over body. . .stretch and settle in, feeling the sun upon your body. . . listening to the waves rolling in. . . and out. . .in . . .and out. . .in . . . and out. Remain here as long as you wish.
  - then stretch, and massage any tension in your face, neck, shoulders, or feet, if you like. Then get up slowly.
- (c)
- Follow exercise (b), but this time, instead of the ocean, imagine yourself in a cool, dark forest. . .walk along a path by a bubbling spring. . .noticing the ferns and wildflowers. . .the shy, small forest animals. . .come upon a clearing with a soft cushion of silent pine needles. . .lie down and listen to the wind whistling through the pine trees. . .the breeze blowing the branches. . .back and forth. . . back and forth. Then, stretch, and massage any tension in your face, neck, shoulders, or feet, if you like. Then get up slowly.
- (d)
- Here is a simple form of meditation, a way of quieting your mind from its continuous racing. It depends upon disciplining yourself to pay attention to counting and breathing, setting aside any thoughts that distract you. This is not as simple as it sounds! Time and again, you will find that you have forgotten about counting and breathing and allowed your mind to return to its habitual ways of worrying. But the learning is in the trying. If you drift away, simply notice this and return to counting and breathing

- Lie down and make yourself comfortable. . .simply notice your breathing . . .do not try to force it. . .just notice the breath going in . . .and out.
  - Now, you are going to count from one to seven along with your breathing. Count each time you exhale. So, inhale, then, as you exhale say “1” to yourself. . .inhale, and as you exhale, count “2” . . . inhale, exhale, and say “3”. . .and so on, until you reach “7”.
  - When you reach “7”, just start over again, with inhale, then “1” on the exhale. Continue repeating as long as you wish.
  - You will find again and again that you have lost track of your counting and drifted off into random thoughts. Don’t punish yourself or get upset with yourself. Just notice and return to watching your breathing, and counting. Continue for fifteen to thirty minutes.
- (e) - Here is a simple relaxation technique:
- Lie down and get comfortable, your whole body supported on the floor or bed.
  - Beginning with your feet, and moving slowly up your body toward your head, you will first tense, and then relax each section of your body. In between each tension-relaxation cycle, you will rest for a moment, just noticing your breathing, so . . .
  - Tense your feet, curling your toes tightly. . .hold for a moment. . . and relax. Let yourself breathe.
  - Tense your calf muscles as tightly as you can . . . hold for a moment. . . and relax. . .and breathe.
  - Move to your thighs. tense them tightly. . .hold. . .and relax. . . and breathe.
  - Now your buttocks and pelvis. . .tense slightly. . .hold, and relax and breathe.
  - Now your stomach and lower back. . .tense. . .hold. . .and relax. . . and breathe . Let your backbone sink into the floor.
  - Now your chest and shoulders. . .tense and hold. . .and relax. . .and Breathe.

- Now your arms. . .tense them up, making fists with your hands. . . Hold. . and relax. And breathe
- Now your neck and shoulders. . .Tense it up, screwing your face into the most horrible grimace. . .hold. . .and relax.
- Now, just lie silently for a while, thinking about something pleasant that you like to do. . .and just drifting.

## **8. Exercises for the Second Step of Focusing: Getting a Felt Sense.**

As in a regular listening turn, in the second step of Focusing, you have to set aside all of your own opinions, reactions, judgments. You have to ask yourself, “What’s this all about?”, and, instead of answering with all of the already known, conscious answers, you have to wait quietly, for as much as a minute, to give the felt sense of the trouble a chance to come forward. In the same way that a Listener reflects your feelings and asks you to go deeper into what it feels like, you will create a listening atmosphere inside of yourself. You ask yourself open-ended questions and attend to the bodily sense of the situation which comes.

Open-ended questions sound like this:

- “What am I feeling now?”
- “What’s going on with me?”
- “What is this sad feeling I have today?”
- “What’s so hard about this for me?”
- “What could make this feel better?”

Open-ended means there is no right, or limited answer. Anything can come in response that wants to. The questions simply invite further exploration. “Closed” questions sound more like your “punishing parent” asking you for answers: “What’s wrong with you!”, “Why did you do that!” “Why do you always act so stupid?” “Why don’t you stand up for yourself?” They start off with assumptions about what your problem is, and they tell you to look for specific answers. They do not give your body a sense of breathing space, a sense that anything that comes will be welcome.

Here are some exercises for practicing the second step of focusing. If you wish, you can read them into a tape recorder first and play the tape back to yourself. Again, PAUSE FOR ONE MINUTE between instructions ( If you have purchased the Self-Help Package, use CD Pre-Focusing Practice: Getting a Felt Sense. There are several more exercises on the CD, including Clearing A Space):

- (a) - Set aside one-half hour of peaceful time. Start with one of the relaxation exercises that you enjoyed in Section Six (retape it)

- At the end of it, when you are relaxed and enjoying being inside, drifting, then, set aside all of your thoughts. . .push everything to the sides, as though you were parting the curtains on a stage.
  - You will now have created a quiet space where something new can arise. Now ask yourself, “How am I today?” and wait and see what arises in that quiet space. . .if you wait for at least a minute, a “felt sense” will arise, a subtle bodily feel of yourself.
  - Just be with the felt sense for a moment, feeling it and trying to find a short feeling word (e.g., “scared”, “sad”, “tense”, “silly”, “joyful”) that feels right for it.
  - When you have a feeling word that seems to capture the felt sense, you can stop.
- (b) Again, set aside one half hour and start with a favorite relaxation exercise (retape it).
- Then at the end, when you are relaxed and drifting, clear a space (setting all thoughts aside)
  - Bring to mind a situation that was difficult for you during the week.
  - Bring the situation to mind and quietly try to get a bodily sense for how you felt in that situation.
  - Again, find a few short feeling words to describe the way you felt in that situation.
  - When you find words that feel right for the feeling, stop for the day.

Practice these two exercises several more times. See if they work equally well for you, or if one of them (e.g., going directly to the feeling of how you are vs. first finding a situation, and then seeing how you feel about it) makes it easier for you to get a bodily sense. In each case, at the end of the exercise, you should have a hold of a felt sense of some concern you are carrying in your body. At the end of either, you could go and have a listening turn with a friend on how you are feeling, using the reflections to help you to find words for the feeling, and, this, to have a felt shift.

This is the basis of Focusing: first, some relaxation instructions to put you in touch with your body. Then, an open-ended question followed by a “wait” for the felt sense to emerge. Thirdly, a careful attempt to find the right words for the feeling.

## 9. Using Focusing to Experience a Felt Shift Inside

In the above exercises, short Focusing instructions have been used to help you to get a felt sense of an issue. In order to get a felt shift on that issue (a bodily tension release accompanied by new thoughts and possible actions), you would have to seek a listening turn with a friend, using the reflections of the other person in order to find the words that are just right for the feeling involved.

The following long Focusing instructions can be used to have a felt shift when you are alone. Instead of having a listening partner, you will try to carry on this listening kind of interaction inside yourself. If you are successful, you can get a felt shift on the concern through this process, instead of waiting until you can arrange a listening turn. Again, try these instructions only as you feel comfortable. Don't be judgmental of yourself if nothing huge seems to be happening.

It can take a long time to learn to recognize a felt sense amidst all of the other things going on inside your body (thoughts, images, muscular sensations, etc). Don't force yourself to stay quietly inside longer than is pleasurable for you – remember, many people learn the basics of focusing and having felt shifts better if they can be in interaction with a Listening partner, as in Chapter 3. But do feel free to try long focusing whenever you have a stuck feeling that is getting in your way, or when you want to take some time for yourself just to see how you are feeling.

Remember that, if any tears arise during a Focusing turn, let them come, just as you would if you were being listened to. The subtle feeling of tears in your eyes is often the first announcement of a felt shift that will radically change your whole perspective on an issue. It is as though the tears, along with all future steps and actions, have been trapped behind a dam, and, as the tears rush out to rejoin the stream, so do new possibilities, understandings, and energies for solving the problem.

When you have tears, keep asking yourself, “What are the words for these tears?”, “What are these tears about?”, and watch for any words or image-memories that arise. These words can then be used for the next step of Focusing.

### INSTRUCTIONS

To begin, I suggest that you buy two 60 minutes cassette tapes (30 minutes on each side), and read the three sets of long focusing instructions into the tape recorder one set to each side of a tape. Even though the instructions may not fill quite all of the thirty minute side, you can just let the tape run out on its own while you continue to lie quietly and be with your inner experience. When you are reading into the tape recorder, make sure to leave at least one minute between instructions (time yourself!), and read with a gentle, welcoming voice. **(If you have purchased The Self-Help Package, Use CD Set Intuitive Focusing Instructions, CD 2: Two 20-minute Focusing Sessions)**

If you don't have a tape recorder, you can read the instructions to yourself, have a friend read them to you, or, if you have a Focusing group, have one person read them to the whole group.

Each of the three sets of instructions emphasizes a different way of getting a felt sense. In (a), you simply ask yourself, "How am I today?" and wait and see what comes as a felt sense. In (b), you make a list of all the things that have been on your mind, get a felt sense for each one, and then choose the one you would like to focus on. In (c) you are asked to think of a specific situation or incident that was upsetting in the recent past, and then to bring back the bodily sense of how you felt in that situation. Try each set. You may find that one way works consistently better for you, or you may find that you like to use different instructions to work on different kinds of concerns.

(a) "HOW AM I TODAY?"

- Lie down and get comfortable.
- Okay, now, stretch your arms up over your head, point your toes, and stretch as long as you can. . . and relax.

Let your body relax into the floor.

- Now, tense up your feet, hold for a second. . . and relax. . . and breathe, in and out. . .now, tensing your calf muscles. . .hold. . .and relax. . .and breathe. . .in and out. . .now, your thighs. . .tense. . .hold. . .and relax. . . and breathe. . .and now your pelvis and buttocks. . .tense. . .and relax. . . and breathe. . .your stomach and lower back. . .tense. . .tense and relax. . . and. . .now your chest and shoulders. . .tense. . .and relax. . .and breathe. . . your arms . . .tense. . .relax. . .and breathe. . .now, your face and neck. . . tense them up. . .wiggle your face all around. . .and relax.
- Notice your thought process. . .and gently set it aside. Make a peaceful place inside of yourself.
- Now, ask yourself, "How am I today?" and just wait and see what comes.
- Find some words or an image that are just right for the feeling of that whole thing.
- Now, ask yourself, "And what's so hard about that?", and again, just wait for a body sense of that whole thing to form.
- Again, find some words or an image that are just right for that feeling.
- Ask yourself, "And why does that matter to me?"

- Wait for an “intuitive feel” to form
- Carefully look for words or an image that are “just right,” resonating and checking any symbols that come until they fit.
- You can continue this back-and-forth Focusing process as long as you like, Asking an open-ended question, Getting a “felt sense,” Resonating and checking words or images against the “intuitive feel” until they are “just right,” Receiving any new information that comes.
- When you have explored the issue enough, ask yourself “What would that be like if it were all okay?” and just wait and see what comes as a bodily sense.
- And let yourself feel any feelings that come here.
- Now, see if you can hold those two “intuitive feels” next to each other inside the way it would be if it were okay, and the way it is now, and see if you can get any change or shift to happen.
- See if you can find any small step that would bring you closer to how you’d like it to be.
- Now, just spend another minute with yourself, and, when you’re ready, end the Focusing for today.

(b) MAKING A LIST ( Eugene Gendlin invented the “inventory” approach to Focusing)

- Lie down and make yourself comfortable
- Tense your whole body. . .hold. . . and relax. . .and breathe. . .in and out.
- Now ask yourself, “What is between me and feeling totally okay?” and wait, at least a minute, for an issue to arise
- Notice where you carry this issue as a tension in your body.
- Look for some words or an image that “fit,” that can serve as a “handle” to bring you back to this issue at another time
- Now, imagine lifting that issue up by its “handle” and setting it down outside of yourself, like unpacking a suitcase. “Aaaaah” There should be a sigh of tension release
- Now ask, “What else is between me and feeling totally okay? And wait, at

least a minute, for an issue to arise

- Repeat the process above, noticing where you carry that issue as a tension in your body, finding some words or an image as a “handle,” then lifting the “whole thing” up and setting it outside of yourself, unpacking your bag....Ahhhhhhh!
- You can continue this process as long as you like...you can also make a list of positive things that you are carrying, each time noticing the bodily “feel,” finding a handle, and setting “the whole thing” outside, unpacking your bag.
- And when you can say, “There is nothing else between me and feeling okay,” spend some time enjoying this moment of freedom in your body from carrying your load.
- Now you have “Cleared A Space.” To continue with a Complete Focusing Session, ask yourself, “Which of these issues wants attention, or what am I drawn to?”, and wait at least a minute to see which issue or positive experience you want to spend more Focusing/problem solving time with
- Bring that “whole thing,” the “felt sense and its “handle”, back inside and ask, “What’s this all about?”
- Wait for at least a minute for a felt sense, an “intuitive feel” to form
- Then, carefully look for some words or an image that are exactly “right” in capturing the “feel of it all
- Keep going back and forth between the felt sense and the words or pictures until you find some that are just right, that allow a little shift of release.
- Ask yourself another open-ended question, like “And why is that important?”
- Again, wait at least a minute for the “felt sense,” the “intuitive feel,” to Form
- Carefully look for words or an image that “fit,” going back and forth, resonating and checking, until the symbols are “just right.” and again
- Receive any new information or steps that come, just sitting quietly and sensing into them.
- You can continue this back-and-forth Focusing process as long as you like, Asking an open-ended question, Getting a “felt sense,” Resonating and

checking words or images against the “intuitive feel” until they are “just right,” Receiving any new information that comes.

- Stop when you are ready and come back into the room

(c) FOCUSING ON A SITUATION (Mary Hendricks was the first to teach this)

- Get comfortable on the floor, letting your weight fall into the floor, trusting the floor to support you.
- Notice where you have tension in your body.
- Now imagine that the tension is a stream of water, flowing out of your body through your fingertips and feet. . .flowing down your body and out your arms and legs.
- Now, let yourself travel inside of your body to a place of peace.
- Now, bring to mind an incident or a situation or an interaction with someone that was troublesome for you this week.
- Think about it or get a mental image of it.
- Now, set aside all of your thoughts about the situation, and just try to remember what it felt like to be in that situation. . . not words but the bodily feel of being there.
- Now, carefully try to find words for that feeling, or an image. Go carefully back and forth between the words and the feel of the whole thing until you find words or an image that are just right for it.
- Now, gently ask yourself, “What’s going on in this situation for me?”, and see if you can get an “intuitive feel” for that.
- Again, carefully find words or an image that exactly fit that feeling
- You can continue this back-and-forth Focusing process as long as you like, Asking an open-ended question, Getting a “felt sense,” Resonating and checking words or images against the “intuitive feel” until they are just “right,” Receiving any new information that comes.
- Now, imagine what the situation would be like if it were perfectly all right.

- Now, go back to the feeling of stuckness and ask, “What’s in the way of that?” and wait and see what comes from the feeling.
- Again, carefully make words or an image for that, and prepare to stop and open your eyes when you are ready.

REMINDER: FOCUSING SHOULD FEEL GOOD, NOT BAD.

Your body should feel lighter and freer as you experience felt shifts. If, as you Focus, you find yourself getting tenser and heavier, and your feelings seem to be getting blacker and worse or more insoluble, then you are going down a wrong road somewhere. Stop Focusing and think about something that you are looking forward to, or open your eyes and look with a lot of attention at the colors and shapes in the room, to get your attention away from that inner space. Then, you might choose to get listened to on the problem instead of trying to Focus on it alone.

Focusing can seem to feel worse if you lose the balance between your questioning voice and the felt sense and go completely into the bodily sense (Gendlin calls this “falling into a sink hole”). If this is happening to you, just back out of the feeling again, think about light and friendly things, and set Focusing on that issue aside until a later time.

## 10. Focusing With Others

- (a) Focusing in pairs (Kristen Glaser had the idea of Focusing in pairs)

As a half way step between Focusing all alone and having a Listening turn, you can also try Focusing in pairs. One person (the “helper”) reads Focusing instructions to the other (the “focuser”), using any of the long Focusing instructions in 9. above. The Focuser can also decide to say a little bit about where he got to during a particular Focusing step (e.g., “Oh, there’s a feeling of sadness there” or “Hm. It seems to be something about my mother”), still keeping his eyes closed and attention upon the felt sense. The helper can then reflect these few words and also tailor the next Focusing question to the specific information (e.g., instead of the general instruction, “Now find some words or an image for the feel of that whole thing”, the helper might say, “So there’s a sadness there. Can you find some words or an image for that sadness?” or “So it seems that it’s something about your mother. Can you find some words for that?”

- (b) The Focusing Group (Mary Hendricks led the first Focusing Group)

One person can also give Focusing instructions for a whole group, or taped or CD instructions, the people can either split up into pairs or triads who go off to exchange listening turns, or, if the group is relatively small, the remaining time can be split into equal portions, and each person can have a turn being listened to

on his focusing turn. As in a regular Listening/Focusing Group (Chapter Three), each person takes a turn as a listener and a listenee, and someone keeps time while a listening pair is working, letting them know when there are only a few minutes left and when the time is up. At the end of the turn, if they wish and if there is time, the listener and listenee can each say how the experience was for them and others in the group can offer short, non-judgmental comments or feedback.

(c ) Making Instructions From Your Own Process (Mary Hendricks taught this)

The written instructions given above are meant only as an example of the kind of open-ended questions that make up focusing instructions. Please assume the freedom to make up your own instructions as soon as you understand the basic idea of asking open-ended questions. The same holds for the pre-focusing relaxation exercises. Many different kind of exercises (breathing, guided fantasy, muscular relaxation, yoga) can be used. It is often best to make up focusing instructions from your own process while you are focusing alone with a group or individual instead of reading them a sheet. The former avoids a stiffness and distance that can creep into reading, and also insures that the steps are given slowly enough to fit people's focusing process. Simply focus along with the group or individual, and say aloud the steps of instruction you make up for yourself, after generalizing them. For example, if you find that your next question for yourself would be, "Why does the idea of violence get me so stuck?", you might say aloud for the others, "See what it is about this feeling or situation that gets you so stuck".

Once you have learned how to focus, it should become an ordinary part of your life. You will stop to focus for a moment whenever you feel overwhelmed by a situation or unclear about what to do next. You will also use focusing to help you to get in touch with your part in an interpersonal conflict or with your wants and needs in relation to a decision being made. Chapter Five introduces you to Interpersonal Processing, a way to use listening and focusing to resolve interpersonal conflict

### SUGGESTED READINGS

For more instructions on Focusing:

1. Gendlin, E.T. *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981 (paperback)
2. Creative Edge Focusing <sup>TM</sup>, [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com) : coaching, workshops, and classes by certified Creative Edge Focusing Consultants
3. The Focusing Institute, [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) : coaching, workshops and classes by Certified Focusing Trainers; books, CDs DVDs

4. Weiser Cornell, Ann. *The Power of Focusing*, New Harbinger Publications, 1996.

For more theoretical understanding:

1. Gendlin, E.T. Focusing. Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 6 (1), 1969, pp. 4-15.
2. Gendlin, E.T., Beebe, J., Cassens, J., Klein, M., & Oberlander, M. "Focusing Ability in Psychotherapy, Personality and Creativity". In J.M. Schlien, (Ed.), Research in Psychotherapy, Vol. III. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1968.
3. Gendlin, E.T., & Olsen, L. "The Use of Imagery in Experiential Focusing". Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 7, 1970, pp. 221-222.
4. Iberg, J. "Focusing." In R. Corsini, (Ed.), Handbook of Innovative Psychotherapies. New York: Wiley Interscience.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERPERSONAL FOCUSING

#### 1. Basic Assumptions

It is hard to “schedule” practice on resolving conflicts. However, if your listening/focusing exchange (Chapter Three) has been meeting for a number of weeks now, you may have begun to notice some personality conflicts between others or you may find yourself being consistently bothered by the behavior of another group member. It is these small tensions that can be used as the practice ground for Interpersonal Focusing skills. If your group is small and quite intimate, two people who are having a tension might agree to work on it with a third person as facilitator, right in front of the rest of you. Or, the three might arrange a more private time and place. In either case, group members will begin to learn to deal with tensions in a listening way by working on the tensions that arise naturally in the group.

If you view an angry person as a hurting person, you are well on the way toward an empathic, or listening, way of dealing with interpersonal conflict. When a person is screaming with anger, she is saying “I perceive you as treading on one of my essential needs, and I am hurting”. If, through empathic listening, you are able to help the person to a more direct expression of her vulnerability and need, it is likely that your own defensive reaction will change to what is called “relational empathy”: even though you are in conflict with the person because she is keeping you from getting your basic needs met, you will be able to see it as it looks to her, to acknowledge the legitimacy of her need, and to care deeply for her in that. Then a resolution of the conflict can arise as an attempt to find a way in which both of you can get your needs met, rather than as a defensive competition to see who can “win” or be proven “right”

In any interpersonal problem, there is a mixture of things brought from the past and “projected” onto the present situation and real aspects of the present situation that need to be taken into account. It seems that, for situations, there is a continuum of how much is “projection”, how much is present reality. Extremes of the continuum might be a paranoid schizophrenic who “projects” evil intentions upon the most casual glance from a passerby vs. the righteous anger of people at a Hitler, who is performing actual evil acts.

Interpersonal Focusing, when used between peers, does not try to decide who is “projecting.” It is assumed (1) that troublesome situations are an interaction, with each person contributing something (although one may be contributing more from the past than the other); (2) that, if two people can be helped to see a situation from each other’s perspective, each will be able to see validity in the behavior of the other. All behavior is seen as rational, as arising as the best possible attempt to meet a particular need, given the person’s perception of the situation and her past learnings of ways to get needs met. The root of the behavior, the basic need, is always valid.

This assumption is basic to the client-centered philosophy of Carl Rogers (1961), from which the idea of empathic listening and Pure Reflection arises. Rogers makes the a priori assumption that human persons are basically good and that all of their behaviors are manifestations of a “tendency toward self-actualization”, an attempt, no matter how twisted or strange the behaviors, to fill basic and legitimate human needs. If through Focused Listening, a person can be helped to express her need directly, the other person will be moved by the legitimacy of the need and willing to work toward some compromise where the needs of each can be met.

The listening and focusing skills outlined in the previous chapters can be used effectively to turn angry confrontation into relational empathy. The two people involved can take turns Listening to each other, or they may call in a third person as a Listening-facilitator. The method is outlined later in the chapter. Here are more basic assumptions:

- 1) It is essential that each person be willing to try to go behind her angry feelings by Focusing on the cause in her, trying to get to her own hurt and vulnerability. Interpersonal Focusing is not a place for dumping one’s anger on another, for blaming another. Anger will be expressed but as a means of getting to the deeper sources behind it. Showing one’s own vulnerability is the best way to allow the other person to let down her defenses.
- 2) It is fruitless to try to establish whose fault the trouble was – each person contributed something of her own to the situation, and each has something to learn about herself, and to share, in the Interpersonal Focusing. In the same way, it is assumed that neither person is essentially bad or evil.
- 3) Being allowed to have anger openly, to rant and rave irrationally, can help a person to get in touch with the hurt underneath, if only she can be responded to in a Listening way. Having the anger reflected (“It really makes you furious that I could have allowed that to happen”) allows it to shift to the next step, expression of the hurt beneath it. Having to sit on the anger, to attempt to be rational and understanding of the other person, can interrupt this process. Having a third person present, who can reflect the brunt of the anger, allows the anger to be expressed without injuring the other person.
- 4) Working through an angry interaction in each other’s presence can lead to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of the bond between two people. Sitting down, sharing heavy feelings, seeing each other get in touch with the vulnerable need behind the interaction, leads to relational empathy, a powerfully warm feeling of understanding the person as she is in this situation and being moved by her pain. Because the two now have some sense of how each reacts to the specific situation, they can also be more sensitive to each other on future occasions and even work out ways of avoiding this particular hurtful interaction in the future.

## **2. An Example of Interpersonal Focusing**

Here is an example of Interpersonal Focusing (this example from the 1970s!):

Stella, alone and bored for an evening, has taken some acid (she doesn't do this often – in fact, this is only the second time). She starts to have a bad trip. Her good friend Karen drops by coincidentally to borrow something. Stella tries to cover her hysteria but tells Karen that she has taken acid. Karen, having been present at and remembering the horrors of Stella's last acid trip, says she has to go home to check in with her roommate but she'll come back. By the time she returns, Stella is really hysterical, running around the house screaming "No!" to some mysterious demons. Karen stays with her for the next three hours, doing an excellent job at talking her down. Stella's roommate returns, and Karen leaves, Stella mostly "down" and with company.

Two days later Karen calls Stella" "I'm so furious with you for taking that acid that I feel like I don't ever want to see you again, so I'd like us to sit down with a third person so we can get through this." Stella feels a rush of anxiety and thinks, "Oh, she's mad at me. What will happen?" but says, "Okay, trusting the Listening process to see them through and also trusting the depth of their relationship. She waits anxiously for the appointed time.

Stella and Karen could have just met and exchanged Listening/Focusing turns about the problem. But because of the intensity of her angry feelings, Karen asked Ted, another member of their Listening/Focusing community, to be present as a Listening facilitator. With Ted there to listen and to protect Stella, Karen felt she would feel more free to get into her angry feelings.

They all arrived and sit down. Karen starts to lay her anger out to Ted. Stella has only to sit and listen, her main task being to take in what Karen is saying but at the same time to hold on to her own sense of herself as a good and worthwhile person. As she listens, she senses some parts of Karen's message which seem appropriate to her, other parts that seem not so accurate, as though they are about some other person.

Karen is furiously telling Ted what happened and how she felt about it. Ted is reflecting her.

Ted: "So just couldn't believe she would be so stupid as to drop acid alone, especially after that other bad trip."

Karen (furiously): "I cannot have a friend who could be so incautious in relation to her own life. She might have killed herself or gotten arrested and locked up in a mental hospital".

Ted: "So what outrages you is her incautious attitude toward her own life – like she might just stumble into committing suicide or getting locked up in a mental hospital".

Now Karen's anger shifts to tears. "Oh, now I know what this is reminding me of and why it's so awful. It's reminding me of Mark (a person she lived with in the past)." She sobs deeply, touching upon an old, very hurt place. Stella and Ted also both get tears in their eyes, moved by her very evident pain. This is relational empathy.

Karen continues: "He really was like that, not caring if he lived or died, and I promised myself that I would never again let myself care about someone who was going to be so uncaring of his own life (a few lighter tears, but also some sense of relief, at it feeling good to have gotten in touch with this deep meaning of the present situation and at the feeling not being totally about Stella any more, so that they can be friends again)."

Ted reflects: "So what's most important there is that, after the hardness of living with Mark like that, you promised yourself you would never get yourself into a position that would bring that kind of pain again, and then here you were, and Stella was looking as though she was just as uncaring of her own life as Mark had been!"

Karen: "Yeah,"

Stella: "I'd like a chance to respond soon."

Karen: Yeah, I'd like to hear that now."

Stella (directly to Karen and without anger): "I really know it was stupid of me to take that acid, and I don't plan to ever do anything like that again. I only did it because I was lonely and hurt and wanted to prove that I could have a good time all by myself. What I should have done is called someone up and said, 'Hey, I'm lonely; can I come over?', and I'll try to be more in touch with that in the future. But another main thing is wanting to tell you I'm not like Mark, that I care a whole lot about my own life and don't feel suicidal about it at all."

Karen: "Yes. I know that about you and can remember it now that I've gotten you separate from Mark."

Stella: "So I do want to say I'm sorry for being such a dummy, and also thanks for coming to my rescue. You were great!" (Smiles and hugs for both and thanks to Ted.)

### **3. When and Why to Initiate Interpersonal Focusing**

Firstly, it is important that you would generally only initiate Interpersonal Focusing when you have some commitment to the other person and honestly want to get through the trouble so that you can become closer or continue an existing friendship. Generally, if your real attitude is, "I can't stand this person, and I don't want to know her", it's probably better just to let the person be and to arrange things so you don't have to be with her very much. However, if there is some basic assumption in you that you

could have empathy with the person if you could only understand how it is for her, then Interpersonal Focusing is probably a good idea.

Secondly, if you are the “observer” of what seems to be a tension between two other people, you have a right to bring your observation up., especially if the way they are being is hurting you in some way, e.g., is making your stomach knot up or leading you to want to stay away from the group. You would simply tell the two what you have been feeling when you are around them, and offer to be a third person facilitator if they would like that. They may or may not be willing to work on the issue. If they are not, you may have to work on your knotted-up feelings in your own separate listening turns.

Thirdly, even if you decide to initiate Interpersonal Focusing with someone, that person has the right to say “No” – if she can’t find within herself that same wish and commitment to understand you, or if she is simply too scared or not ready or whatever. You can always go work on your feelings about the other person using Focusing by yourself or in a Listening/Focusing Partnership turn with someone else and still learn about your side of the interaction. In this way, you can get pretty much freed from the “hooked” feeling, the strong emotional reaction you have because of the way that the person relates to your own past history and wants and needs.

For instance, in the example above, Karen could have worked on her feelings about Stella without ever telling Stella there was a problem. She could have simply called Ted for a Listening/Focusing turn, and in that turn she probably would have been able to get in touch with the same feelings about the past (e.g., the way Stella’s behavior reminded her of Mark). What would have been lost is the relational empathy: the deepening that happens when each person gets to learn more about the other’s vulnerable places.

Also lost would be the clarification from Stella about how she really is different from Mark, and the possibility of cooperation between the two to avoid the situation in the future. This is important, since the way that Stella sometimes acts like Mark (even though she does it for a different reason – e.g., loneliness rather than suicidal impulse), is likely to recur in the future. Unless there is some shared understanding between the two of this possible “hook” between them, Karen is likely to distance herself a little from Stella in order to protect herself from these memories about Mark.

Ideally, it could be said that if Karen kept working on her past feelings about Mark (her “projection”) until they were all gone, or brought totally to consciousness, she would then stop having a reaction to Stella, even if Stella didn’t change at all. However, such changes can take a long time, and, in the mean time, it seems better for the possibility of relationship and community that Stella and Karen be able to have an understanding of their possible “hook”. Through relational empathy, they will be able to care about each other mutually enough that they can try to avoid hurt feelings about the particular interaction in the future.

#### **4. How to do Interpersonal Focusing ( Table 5.1 )**

Basically, when you're having trouble with the way someone else is acting or feeling angry at her for something that happened between you, you go to the person and say something like, "I'm having some kind of tension with you about \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm wanting to sit down and work it through." If the person agrees to work on it, then you set a time (1-2 hours) to do Listening/Focusing turns/ on the issue.

### **First Stage: Clarification of the Issue**

The process you will use when you sit down is the same as Listening/Focusing on any other situation, except that you do the turn on the concern that is troubling you. So, one of you would go first and lay out what the issue is about and Focus on how she is feeling about it. The other sits aside all of her reactions, opinions, her "own side", clarifications, etc., and reflects what the other is saying to make sure that she understands it.

When the first person feels she has said enough and wants a reaction, or when the Listener feels that she can't hold onto her own side much longer, then they switch roles – the second person Focuses for a while, saying how she saw the situation or what was important for her in what the other said or clarifying some simple misunderstanding. The other person uses Listening to reflect her and to help her to articulate her reaction until, again, one or the other feels at a switching place.

Here are some helpful hints for conducting this initial sharing of the problem:

#### **a) Owning instead of Blaming**

When you are having trouble with someone, your initial tendency would be to say to them, "I can't stand you. You're so aggressive!" or "You're such a selfish person!" or "Why are you always so mean!" All of these statements basically blame the other person for the trouble between you, as though you are assuming "I'm perfect, but this other person is doing something terrible to me".

It's important to remember that troubles between people are an interaction, something about the other person, but also something about you combined. The interactive nature becomes clear if you realize that a particular habit of another person may drive you crazy, but have no effect upon your roommate at all. In the example above, it's true that Stella did something stupid and possibly hurtful to herself, but someone other than Karen may have felt no anger but only sorry for Stella and supportive of her. It is because of her own past history and inner meanings that Karen had such a strong emotional reaction. The trouble belongs to both of them.

It was important for Karen to try to own her own past in the interaction instead of blaming Stella entirely. The best way to own is by talking about, and Focusing upon, your own inner feelings, not talking about the other person. For instance, Karen

might say “When you took acid like that, I was afraid that you might kill yourself and that made me afraid to be your friend because it would hurt me if you killed yourself”. Of course, this kind of a statement is much easier for Stella to hear than if Karen says, “You are a terrible person”; “How can you be so stupid”; etc. Stella’s natural reaction to the latter statements would be to come to her own defense and to say, “Well, you didn’t have to come over. Who asked for your help?”

## **b) Behavioral Specificity Instead of Generalizations**

A second key to interpersonal messages is “behavioral specificity”. One reason blaming statements are so hurtful is because they contain blaming generalizations: “You are a terrible person!” “You are stupid.”: “You are selfish.” When condemned in such a global way, the other person has little choice but to feel terrible about herself or to defend herself.

Feedback is much easier to hear if it is about a specific behavior. For instance, it’s easier to hear, “When you take food off of my plate like that, it makes me feel scared that you’re not thinking of my needs at all, and makes me want to protect myself” than, “God. What a stupid pig you are!” You will notice that the former statement of feelings.

So, when you use Interpersonal Focusing, start by describing the specific situation that bothered you and how it made you feel. Make sure that your “feeling” statements are really feelings, e.g., things that could happen inside of you. Sometimes we say “I feel. . .” when we should say “I think. . .” For instance, you might say, “When you chose to sit next to Mary instead of me, I felt you humiliated me,” This is not a feeling you had, but a thought that you had about the other person’s behavior. A feeling statement would be “When you chose to sit next to Mary instead of me, I felt bad about myself. It brought up my fear of not being interesting to anyone.”

### More examples:

NOT “When you speak so loudly, I feel you’re very aggressive”,  
BUT “When you speak so loudly, I find I can’t remember what I wanted to say, and I feel stupid. Then it’s hard for me to be around you.”  
NOT “When you interrupt me, I feel you pressure me”,  
BUT “When you interrupt me, I get lost and feel all confused inside, and I feel panicked because I can’t think until I’m by myself again.”

You won’t always be perfect at these kinds of statements, and, with the Interpersonal Focusing structure, sometimes you can just be free to have your irrational anger at the other person (You might say, “I feel that you humiliated me”, and the other person will reflect, “So what’s hard for you is that you felt humiliated in

## **TABLE 5.1**

### **HOW TO USE INTERPERSONAL FOCUSING**

ALLOW TWO HOURS

#### **FIRST STAGE: CLARIFICATION OF THE ISSUE**

(several five or ten minute turns)

- (a) Owning instead of blaming:  
“I feel. . .” instead of “You are. . .”
- (b) Behavioral specificity instead of generalizations:  
“When you . . .” instead of “You are. . .”  
“When you do. . ., I feel. . .”

#### **SECOND STAGE: GOING DEEPER**

(one or more twenty minute turns for each person)

- (a) Use Focusing on your own hurt feeling:  
“What’s in this for me?”
- (b) Honestly try to discover your own part in the interaction:  
“Why does this bother me so much?”

#### **AN OPTION: USING A THIRD PERSON AS A LISTENING FACILITATOR**

- (a) Allows for the expression of angry feelings in a protected way
- (c) Protects against issues of distortion  
And mutual distrust

front of all of those people”), but it’s at least important to be conscious of whether you are owning or blaming and to know that the other person will have an easier time hearing you if you talk about specific behaviors. The less you say about how she is, and the more you share about your own vulnerable reaction to the situation, the less defensive she will feel.

### **Second Stage: Going Deeper**

After the initial laying out of “both sides”, and clarification (which may have cleared up the situation), if the trouble is still unresolved, it is time for each person to try to go deeper into why this particular interaction is so upsetting to her. While the first turns were more for understanding and clarification between the two, the second turns are for exploration by each person of her whole inner feeling sense in relation to the troubled interaction. During these turns, each person is using Focusing and taking responsibility for getting in touch with that part in the situation which may have been carried over from her own past history and vulnerabilities.

These turns will need to be about twenty minutes each, with the speaker Focusing inward on her whole sense of this trouble for her, and the Listener using all of the various kinds of Focused Listening responses to try to help her to go deeper in making words for the “intuitive senses” that are there, until there is some shift, or release, and new understanding of the meaning of the trouble for her.

It is this step of going of going deeper, where each person is trying to Focus inward and get a shift in her own feelings, that the Interpersonal Focusing approach differs from other approaches which have used reflective listening as a form of communication between two persons who are having a disagreement, such as Thomas Gordon’s PET conflict resolution and the work of the Guerneys in conjugal and filial therapy.

The Interpersonal Focusing philosophy is that interpersonal problems are not just failures in communication, resolved if the two people can hear each other’s point of view and reach some kind of compromise, but also that having very strong feelings in an interpersonal situation means that something about one’s own past history has gotten “hooked”. It then becomes each person’s responsibility to try to use Intuitive Focusing, to say “Now, why am I so upset by what this person is doing? I’m acting as though my whole life were being threatened. Where is that coming from in me?” and to get listened to until that inner question is answered.

In the same way, if one person acknowledges that she did a hurtful thing in the interaction, then she will use Intuitive Focusing on her whole sense of where she was coming from, what was behind that behavior for her, what she was trying to accomplish even though it may have turned out badly. Again, she would be using reflections to help her to go deeper, looking for a shift in her own understanding of who she was in the interpersonal situation.

## **5. Using a Third Person As A Listening Facilitator**

Although two people can work through a trouble on their own as I have outlined above, it is often wise to insure that there is a third person present to act as a Listening facilitator. This is especially true if very angry feelings are involved (as in the example of Stella and Karen) or when people are new at learning to set themselves aside so they can listen to another. When feelings are very strong between two people, it may be impossible for the one who is supposed to be Listening at any particular time to set aside all of her own reactions and feelings and simply reflect the other accurately.

To protect against this, the third person can take the role of Focused Listener, reflecting first one person and then the other. The participation of the third person is especially important in Stage Two, Going Deeper, where each person is trying to use Focusing on her own feelings in order to find out something new.

On the one hand, the person who is Focusing is making herself vulnerable in a situation where the other person may be just waiting to find evidence of fault and to lay blame. It's hard for her to explore her own possible contribution to the trouble with the very person who is most invested in proving her wrong. Having the Listening/Focusing interaction with the third person, with no interruption from the other, is much more likely to allow the kind of trust needed for approaching vulnerable feeling.

Also, in terms of the second person, the investment in believing that the other person was wrong or bad, that she did a hurtful thing (which seems to be part and parcel of feeling angry and hurt) gets in the way of being able to reflect accurately and help the person to go deeper. Subtle distortions, based on one's assumptions about the person's motives or hidden intentions or immaturities, creep into the reflections. The speaker picks this up and declares, "I don't feel safe going on with you." The third person can allow the kind of safety and sensitive Listening and Focusing instructions that can bring about a real shift in one or both persons and the possibility of change in the whole trouble they are having.

In choosing a third person, it's important to find someone with whom both people feel comfortable and whom both people feel will be unbiased. It is also important that each speaker get approximately equal time through the processing experience, as a guarantee that each person feels fairly treated.

If a third person is doing the main part of the reflecting of one speaker, before switching to a turn for the second person, the second person should try to do a summary reflection of what the first has said, so that the first person will know that her communication is being taken in some way.

The rhythm of Interpersonal Focusing is worked out between the two or three people involved. They must agree on a time limit – some point at which they intend to be finished or will at least reassess the situation and decide whether to continue or to meet again some other day. Usually, a serious tension takes about 1 ½-2 hours to work

through, with each person having several short five or ten minutes turns for clarification and laying out of the issue and each person having a twenty minute turn for going deeper, with a few more short turns at the end for reactions.

As they go along, the two will make a lot of agreements about how to proceed, like “How about I take ten minutes, then you take ten, then we decide where to go from there.” Each person will also be responsible for indicating when she feels a need for a change in speakers – a Listener may need to say, “I can’t go on much longer without a turn”, or a speaker may say, “I’ve said enough; I need to hear a response from you”. If there is a third person Listening facilitator, she may want to turn to the second person and say, “Can you say back what she just said? It seems important that she hear it from you, or, to a speaker, “Can you say that directly to (the second person) – I think she would like to hear it from you”.

It’s also nice, and a good idea, to give the third person a five or ten minute listening turn at the end of Interpersonal Focusing so that he or she can work through any tension left from participating in what may have been a hard interaction. It’s always a good idea to take care of our helpers!

## **6. More Examples**

Here are some more examples of Interpersonal Focusing and what can happen:

Sam and Larry are brothers. Sam is unemployed, and Larry had been giving him a lot of help and support. Sam has been in and out of several jobs, but is now unemployed again. Sam feels he’s being ignored by Larry. He asks Larry to do Interpersonal Focusing with a third person (F = facilitator).

- S: “I’m mad at you because you never call me any more or ask me out to dinner. I feel like you don’t care about me any more, that I’m nothing, and this makes me sad”.
- F: “So you feel mad and sad that Larry never calls you any more. It makes you feel that you’re nothing,, that he doesn’t care about you anymore.”
- S: “Here I am, having a hard time, unemployed, and he doesn’t seem to care about me!”
- F: “So here it’s hard time for you and he doesn’t seem to care.”
- S: “I’m all alone here, and, if he doesn’t care about me, then I don’t have anybody.”
- F: “So you’re having a hard time, and you’re all alone, and you really need to hear from Larry. He’s your only friend.”
- S: “He used to call me all the time, but now there’s nothing, and I want to know what’s going on.”
- F: “So you want to know if there’s some reason why he’s not calling you now.”
- S: “Yeah.”
- F: “Can we hear from Larry now?”

- S: “Yeah. That’s right.”  
(L focuses quietly for a moment, gets some tears in his eyes.)
- L: “It seems like the reason I don’t call you anymore is that I can’t stand seeing you like this anymore (tears). It’s more because I care about you so much, and it makes me feel so sad to see you stuck like this, and I’m afraid it’s going to go on forever, and I think I avoid you because of this.”  
(At this point S has tears in his eyes too – from hearing that L does care about him and feels sad for him. This is relational empathy.)
- F: “So it’s not that you don’t care but that you almost care too much. You just can’t stand seeing Sam like this anymore, and that’s why you don’t call.”
- L: “Yeah. I can see that that’s not a good way, but that’s what you’ve been doing – just putting it out of my mind because it hurts too much.”
- F: “So you really want something good to happen for Sam. For him to get a break and his life to be better.”
- S: “Can I speak soon?”
- L&F: “Sure”.
- F: “Sam, can you just summarize first?”
- S: “Yeah. I hear you saying, Larry, that you really do care about me (both have tears in their eyes) and maybe that’s even why you don’t call, and I appreciate hearing that. That’s mostly all I wanted to say – that I appreciate it. I guess I’d like it if you called, too, sometimes, if you could, and I’ll try not to sound so down and out.”
- L: “Yes. I’ll try to do that more – to realize when I’m ignoring you and not deal with it that way.”

Another sample:

Jill and Anna have just met a few hours ago at a Listening/Focusing conference. Jill is feeling tense around Anna and avoiding being in the same room with her. She asks Anna if she would process with a third person, and Anna agrees.

- J: “I just feel real uptight when I’m around Anna. I feel real jealous. I feel ugly, and I feel that Bill (Jill’s boyfriend) likes Anna better than me, that he’s attracted to her.”
- F: “So you feel uncomfortable and jealous – as though Anna’s more attractive than you and Bill will want to be with her.”
- J: “Yes. I feel so jealous – almost like I hate Anna for the way she looks.”
- F: “So there’s a tremendous jealous feeling, and almost a hate. Can you focus into that jealous feeling?”
- J: (Quiet, eyes close, focusing for a moment, Then . . .) “I think it’s because Anna looks a way I have always wanted to look. She dresses so self-confidently and with such an individual flair. I’d like to feel that way about myself.”
- F: “So maybe it’s that Anna looks a way you’ve always wanted to look – she looks self-confident and not afraid to express herself in her clothes.”

J: “Yeah. That helps a little – to get in touch with that.”  
 F: “Anna, would you like a turn?”  
 A: “Yeah. You are saying, Jill, that you feel threatened by the way that I dress, and it seems maybe because I look a way that you’ve always wanted to look – something about ‘self-confident’ and ‘individual’.”  
 J: “Umhummm.”  
 A: “(Quiet for a moment.) “What you say makes me want to laugh! Me self-confident! I don’t feel that way at all. I feel really quite shy and always am thinking that I’m a little fat. It’s funny you think I’m the self-confident one.”  
 F: “So it makes you laugh that Jill would be threatened by your self-confidence, when you don’t feel self-confident at all.”  
 A: “And I also think it would be sad if we end up competing with each other, And that you, Jill, would think that I would like to know you, and I’m certainly not wanting to do anything to jeopardize your relationship with Bill.”  
 F: “So you want Jill to know that you would like to know her and that it would be sad if that didn’t happen because of competition – and you aren’t after her man.”  
 A: “Yeah.”  
 F: “Jill?”  
 J: “Umhum. You’re saying that you’re not as confident as you look, and that You would like to know me – and that you’re interested in me, and not my man.”  
 A: “That’s right.”  
 J: “I feel better. It’s nice to hear that you’re pretty much like me on the inside. I would like to know you, too. Let’s give it a try.”

This latter example might not have worked out so easily. For instance, it could have ended like this:

J: “It helps some to hear that from you, but I still feel scared about you and Bill. It would help me if you wouldn’t spend too much time alone with him. I know it’s my own stuff, but I just don’t feel like I can handle it right now without being jealous.”  
 A: “That’s okay with me. I don’t need to be alone with him.”

OR, at this point, Anna might have said:

A: “That seems too strange to me. I can’t make a rule like that.”  
 F: “So it would seem too strange or too unlike yourself to make a rule like that.”  
 A: “Yeah. I feel it’s sort of her problem. I’m not doing anything to ‘get’ him. And it’s not my fault if she has a lot of feelings about it.”  
 F: “So it seems to you that it’s Jill’s problem. You’ve assured her that you’re not after him and you’re not in any way trying to ‘get him, so if she still

has feelings, that's her problem.”

A: “Yeah. I mean, she should work on that.”

F: “So at this point, you think Jill should work on those feelings instead of trying to get you to change.”

A: “Yeah.”

F: “Jill?”

J: “Yeah. She's saying that since she's made it clear she's not pursuing Bill, that if I still have feelings, I should work on them, and that it would be unnatural for her to make a special effort not to spend time with Bill.”

A: “And I really am not trying to get him.”

J: “And you want me to hear real clearly that you are not trying to steal him away from me.”

A: “Yeah.”

J: “Let me see if I can feel into this jealous feeling some more. . . (Quiet Focusing). . .it seems to have something to do with my father. . .”

F: “So there's something there about your father.”

J: “Yeah. . . it seems like he was always with other women, and I could see how sad my mom was . . .how bad she felt about herself.”

F: “So you would watch your Dad admiring other women, and you could just feel how your mother felt – how sad and insecure about herself she felt.”

J: “Yeah. And I learned to hate that in my father, and I decided to never look attractive in that way that would threaten other women.”

F: “So you almost made a conscious decision not to be involve in that kind of competition, not to look attractive in that way.”

J: “Yeah . . . and now here I am being jealous of Anna for looking that way!”

F: “So it seems sort of mixed up, like on the one hand, you wish you looked that way and, on the other hand, you promised yourself or maybe sort of your mother, that you would never look that way.”

J: “Yes. It sort of helps to see that confusion and to see that it goes back to Those situations with my father. I think that I could stop here, and I'll make sure to work on those feelings some other time. And for now, Anna, I can see that it's not something that you're doing to me, and, if I keep having trouble, maybe I'll get listened to again, or maybe I'll talk to Bill and make sure he still cares about me. I think that would help som – to get some reassurance that he finds me attractive.”

F: “So is this okay with both of you?”

A: “Yes. I do hope we can find some casual time just to get to know each other. I think that would help.”

J: “Me, too.”

## **7. The True Meaning of “Encounter”**

As you can see, there is no predictable rule for how things will work out. Sometimes the best people can agree to is that their mutual “hook” is pretty bad, and they had better not try to be too close right now. But, even then, the parting will be done with a

mutual acceptance of the dignity of each person, and of her right to be the way that she is, even if that way is not “objectively” perfect.

It is a basic assumption of the Listening philosophy that people have learned their maladaptive ways of being as the best possible way to survive in difficult, past situations. In this way, these behaviors have been useful and even crucial to the person in the past. Now that the person is in a different situation, she may find these behaviors to be maladaptive and want to change them. But it’s not easy to give up something that seemed absolutely essential to one’s survival in the past.

Such change does not happen overnight, nor is it fair for someone to demand such change of a person. The important attitude for a Listening/Focusing community is tolerance for the ways that people are different, and an attempt to understand emphatically how each person got to be the way that she is. At the same time, people can support each other in choosing to change some past ways of being.

When Martin Buber first used the terms “encounter” and “confrontation”, he was talking about moments of empathic understanding: when two people stand naked of artifice and see each other clearly; when one person is revealed to the other in all of her vulnerability and is empathically received. Confrontation had to do with this meeting in mutual vulnerability; it did not have the present day meaning of one person tearing down another, or one person standing safe in her hiddenness while forcing another to be uncovered. True “encounter” or “confrontation” can only happen in an atmosphere of safety and respect, where a person can risk letting the covers drop and standing revealed (thanks to Zack Boukydis for clarifying this: personal communication).

In a Listening/Focusing community, the emphasis is not upon demanding that people change. The community is meant to be just the opposite: the one place that a person can come and know that she will be accepted exactly as she is. It is only from a base of such acceptance that a person can consider change. The essence of Interpersonal Focusing is not a “confrontation” with the other where one person tells the other what she doesn’t like about her. The essence is a willingness to share one’s own vulnerability and to come to be more acceptant of the other person’s behavior through understanding its meaning to the person. If one or both persons then choose to change, the community can support them in that process.

Chapter Six tells how to use your skills in Listening, Focusing and Interpersonal Focusing to resolve conflicts in groups.

## CHAPTER SIX

### COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING

#### 1. Consensus and Individual Responsibility

In the early stages, a Listening/Focusing exchange (Focusing Partnership Group or Focusing Community) will demand little decision-making—perhaps a hasty five minutes to decide when and where to meet again or how far to read in the manual. However, if your group is beginning to move into considerations about staying small or growing larger, about advertising for new members or not, then it is time to begin devoting a good half-hour now and then to deep discussion and planning around these issues. Chapter Six tells you how to run such planning meeting in a way that maximizes empathy and creativity and minimizes conflict.

If there is ever going to be peace on this earth, whether globally or between individuals, we are going to have to find ways of decision-making which start from the assumption that, if we try hard enough and creatively enough, a solution can be found where everyone can get what he wants or needs. As long as we see problem-solving as a conflict, with only one side to win, then conflict is what we will get. The first step is a movement away from an attitude that says “Either . . . or . . .” to one that says, “I need this. What do you need? How can we both get our needs met? How would it be if we tried this?”

This is the basic attitude of cooperative, consensual decision-making: We will sit together until we find a solution that works for everyone. There is no majority vote here, no sacrificing of the needs of some simply because more people want it the other way. All participants deserve to get what they need, to have found some way that they can continue to live and be themselves within any group decision. As long as one group member cannot get his needs met, decision-making continues. The object is to find a solution that is agreeable to everybody. In cooperative, consensual decision-making, no group imposes its will upon an individual.

In a Listening/Focusing Community, we expect individuals to be responsible for themselves, to know and say as honestly as possible what they can and can't do in particular situations. This is the meaning of the existential term “authenticity: We respect the dignity of persons when they are trying to be “authentic” in this way. No one is forced to go against his own inner judge of what is right or wrong to do. No one is encouraged to go along with the crowd.

One of the goals of the client-centered Focusing process described in this book is to enable people to come in touch with what they are feeling and to act on the basis of this inner knowing. Along with this freedom to act in congruence with one's inner valuing process comes the task of being responsible for one's feelings and actions: “I acted because I reflected and decided that this was the action most consistent with my beliefs and feelings that was available to me in this situation. I am willing to be

responsible for my choice. I stand by my action.” For the existentialists (Buber, Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), such action, chosen in the dual realm of freedom and responsibility, is the core of the authentic and meaningful life. The existentialists’ “authenticity” is not a license to anarchy, a permission to do exactly what you want at every moment, to be uncommitted and thus totally “free”, to be, in the end, irresponsible. It is important to stress that authenticity always is a two-sided coin. It involves the freedom to choose and the responsibility to stand by one’s decisions.

The Listening/Focusing model wants to enable people to live authentically and responsibly. To live authentically, people must have the ability to know what they are feeling and the freedom to choose actions that are congruent with that feeling. Only then will they feel responsibly committed to their actions. Consensual decision-making demands that each participant be responsible for coming in touch with his wants and needs, express them, and stand by them until a solution is found which honestly meets these needs.

In consensual decision-making, a person is not expected to “cave in” to group pressure, to agree in order not to be a bother anymore or so as not to “hold up” the decision-making. In fact, just the opposite is true. The individual is responsible for holding on to this objection or dissension until a decision is reached to which he can feel authentically committed. Conversely, if individuals are expected to be responsible for their actions, they must be allowed to participate in the tailoring of solutions behind which they can put themselves whole-heartedly. Only then can they be expected to find agreed-upon actions “authentic” and to carry them out responsibly.

In a group where one party discourages the other from honestly voicing opinions, or where one party insists upon imposing its will upon the other (as in majority rule), the flip-side of authentic living, which is apathy, is set up: “If it makes no difference if I voice my wants and needs and opinions, then there is no point in my working to be aware of my wants and needs and opinions. It no longer makes sense for me to want anything”.

There is a myth in our culture that it is important for one to “go along with” the majority “for the good of the group.” If a person, after hearing all of the pros and cons, is convinced that a certain position is best for the group as a whole (including himself), the person will authentically commit himself to the decision – the person will want that decision for the group and will come to the point of “voting” for it, or “consenting”. The decision will then be made by consensus.

If a vote must be taken, it means that there are people who are not yet convinced that the best decision for the group has been found. The listening philosophy would hold that, if so, there are still some feelings, wants, and intuitions that must be explored so that a more creative, better solution for the group can emerge.

## 2. **Everyone Doesn’t Have To Do The Same Thing**

Consensus does not mean that the whole group has decided to act as one unit. It means that a decision has been found to which each individual group member can give his consent. For consensus to emerge, it is only necessary that a dissenting group member get to the point of saying, “I still have some reservations, but it’s okay with me if the group goes with that decision”, or “It’s okay with me if the group goes ahead with that action, as long as I don’t have to participate”. It is important to stress two points:

- (1) Everyone in the group does not have to do the same thing. Consensus does not mean that everyone has to act in unison. Often, as easy and appropriate way to ease many conflicts is to realize, “Oh, I don’t have to participate in that action, and it’s fine with me if others want to do it.”
- (2) Everyone in the group does not have to be involved in the planning or decision-making meetings.

One way to insure that a decision-making meeting will fail is by forcing people to be there who would rather be doing something else (Gene Gendlin has articulated this point repeatedly :personal communication). Likely as not, they will try to do the “something else” at the meeting (e.g., socialize, get therapy or a listening turn on a personal issue, get attention), thereby obstructing the business. If there are some people in your group who don’t care about being involved in making decisions, who hate business meetings, and who are happy to go along with whatever decisions are made by the others, then these people need not come to business meetings.

This principle of non-participation is especially applicable to decision-making in a Listening/Focusing community. Most of the decisions are minor (“What program should we have on which night?”, “Shall we do presentations or listening turns first?”; “Shall we advertise for new members; if so, how?”). If there are people who really don’t care and simply want to come and participate in whatever program has been planned, they need not attend decision-making meetings. The important point is that decision-making meetings are public: the time and place and the issues to be discussed are announced at the community meeting. Anyone who wants to can be involved in decision-making and planning; everyone does not have to be.

It is best, whenever possible, to arrange to have the business meeting separate from the other Listening/Focusing/socializing activities of the community, e.g., those interested in planning future meetings can arrive one-hour before the scheduled community meeting, or can meet on another day. Or, if a planning meeting must be held during the scheduled activity time, it is important to arrange for another activity to be held at the same time, e.g., “Those wanting to plan will meet in the parlor; those wanting to participate in a movement-focusing group or to socialize will meet in the meeting room.” If business is the only event planned, then anyone wanting any kind of social contact or caring attention will have to show up at the business meeting and try to get those needs met there, thereby obstructing the business

Similarly, if someone consistently refuses to come to consensus on every issue, it would be worth using Interpersonal Focusing to explore with the person whether this is because of actual disagreement on principle or whether it is because the person has a need he is trying to fill at the business meeting that could be better filled in some other way, e.g., perhaps the person really wants to be listened to on his personal life issues, but is afraid to ask for that much personal attention directly. In that case, several people could offer to give that kind of personal attention, either in another room right then, or at a later date. Or perhaps the person feels slighted by the group as a whole and left out of socializing activities. If he can have a chance to express this need through listening, then the group can work on the issue of exclusivity openly and find a solution for the future.

The salient point is that decision-making meetings be open to anyone who wants to come, and that those who do not come realize that they are then tacitly agreeing to go along with the decisions that are made. If such a non-participant decides that he doesn't like the decision, then he can call for a decision-making meeting in the future where the decision can be reconsidered.

### **3. Examples of Consensus**

Now, given that you have a group (often quite small) which is made up only of people who wish to be involved in decision-making on a particular issue, you can proceed to work consensually. Already that word may arouse feelings of despair in you: "How can everyone get his own way?!" or "We'll be here all night!", you may be saying out of your past experience with groups. However, once the assumption is made that, not competition, but cooperation, is the manner of decision-making, you will be surprised at the truly creative ways for meeting people's needs that begin to arise. For me, this kind of decision-making is like doing a jigsaw puzzle, and there is a positive feeling of delight when all of the pieces fall into place: "Well, what if we did it this way?" "Ah, yes! That works for everyone. Why didn't we think of it before?"

Here's a small example of cooperative decision-making. It may seem trivial, but, when I think of the time that might have been spent haggling, or the number of people that might have gone home discontented if we had only gone one way or the other, I find it quite pleasing:

I was teaching a peer-counseling group. I had planned to accomplish several things, but we had gotten behind in time. I was in a dilemma, saying, "Well, there's so little time left - - we can really only do the focusing exercise or the listening turns - which do you want to do?" Some wanted one, some the other. Suddenly someone realized, "Why, we can do both! Those who want to do listening turns can go off in triads and supervise each other!" A solution which pleased everyone. Four stayed to focus; two triads went off to do listening.

Here are some more typical examples:

- (a) In my Listening/Focusing Community, we are always going over time in an initial go-around where we each say how we have been this week. Discussion:
- A: "It just takes too much time. Someone should keep time and let people know when a few minutes are up."
- B: "No. I would hate to be policed like that. I wouldn't be able to think, I'd be so busy waiting to hear when my time is up."  
(Some argument back and forth, then :)
- C: "Why not bring a three-minute egg timer! We could pass it from person to person."  
Everyone: "Yeah. That would be neat. Then each person would be responsible for policing her own turn," etc.
- (b) In a Listening/Focusing Group there was a conflict about time for meetings. Most people didn't care; one person wanted to meet one-half hour earlier so that she could avoid a long subway ride late in the evening; another person wanted to keep the original time, so that she would have time to eat a non-rushed dinner before the group. The two were really stuck, neither giving one way or the other. It seemed to some of us present that they couldn't possibly be arguing this much over one-half hour. Eventually it became clear that the "non-rushed dinner" had deeper meanings for the person involved. The person had a special dietary need which required that she eat at particular times, and she felt vulnerable about sharing this special need with the group. The "non-rushed dinner" was also one of the few times that she had the opportunity of meeting new people, and this was very important to her. The expression of these vulnerable needs aroused empathy in the other and a first move toward compromise. The second person felt that one-half hour difference on the subway was less important to her than the needs of the other. A ride to the subway station was found for this person, and a solution was arrived at that felt good to all and increased the depth of feeling and mutual concern in the group.
- (c) In a Listening/Focusing Group, group members requested more formal training from two members who were more skilled and had initiated the group. One of the two kept having an uncomfortable feeling about this demand, although the desire for more theoretical knowledge seemed legitimate. As that person was listened to on her feeling of resistance to the idea, it emerged that the next step for her in the group was to become less of a leader. Taking on more of a teacher role was the opposite of what she wanted. She got a feeling of freedom and willingness when she realized she could teach the others to be leaders, and sessions were instituted where participants were encouraged to articulate their own experiential knowledge of the theory behind listening and focusing. In this way, everyone got what they wanted: they became more able to talk about

the theory and the skilled person was able to see them becoming teachers rather than students.

- (d) In a small Listening/Focusing Group there was a conflict around openness to new members. Some people wanted friends and other interested people to be able to attend a meeting in order to decide if they wanted to join the group. Others felt that the presence of strangers would interfere with their growing trust of the group and inhibit them in the exploration of feelings. Finally, they realized they could have it both ways: people would be informed a week ahead, and some group members could arrange to go off in another room with a trusted “old” member for a more “private” listening turn that evening. Everyone felt fine about this solution.
- (e) In a Listening/Focusing Group, some people wanted more members; others did not have the energy for the kind of outreach that was involved. It was easily decided that anyone who wanted to do outreach could do so, but that everyone need not be involved in that effort.
- (f) In a larger Listening/Focusing Community, there was a very heated discussion because one of the participants wanted to do a presentation about her particular religious orientation. Others felt that the importation of “religious proselytizing” into a Listening/Focusing Community was absolutely against their principles. The issue was resolved quite easily when it was realized that everyone did not have to attend the presentation; it would be there for anyone who wanted to attend, and others could come later for the listening turns after the presentation, or could go off in another room for whatever activity they wished during the presentation.
- (g) At a meeting of a feminist organization, a lot of emotion was aroused by a suggestion that there be a special event at a Women’s Only bar. Many reasons based upon the lateness of the suggestion, the extra work involved in planning the event, etc., were given, yet did not seem logical or proportional to the feeling invested. When the large group split into smaller groups for discussion of feelings, much more sensitive issues about the relationship between straight and gay members of the group, and feelings of being left out and/or divided, emerged. As they became aware of the deeper issues involved, group members realized that the event wasn’t the issue and could be planned, but that the group needed to schedule time in the near future for sharing on the deeper issue

#### **4. Working With Feelings Creatively**

Since many people are of the belief that emotions are what ruin business meetings (“if only we could be logical about this!”), I want to say some more about the place of feelings at decision-making meetings.

Firstly, I want to remind you (as discussed in Chapter Two) that feelings and emotions are not the same thing. No, it is not true that a lot of people being “emotional” will lead to good group decisions. However, whenever a decision is made that has any real effect upon participants, emotions (strong likes and dislikes, wants, needs, fears of not getting needs met, frustrations) will be present. If you try to make a rule against them, the emotions will just go underground and come out in twisted logical arguments and positions held rigidly without any understandable reason. The listening approach to decision-making lets us acknowledge emotion when it is present at meetings and to deal with it openly. As in a regular listening turn, the goal is to focus on the emotion and to find the whole felt sense of it, to see what it is about. What will eventually come out is a legitimate want or need which must be taken into account if decisions are to be satisfying to group members.

When two people are yelling at each other, or when people on sides of an issue are arguing, it can be assumed that, regardless of what is being said on the surface, underneath the words, important felt needs are being engaged: People are arguing because they are trying to get something which is very important to them. It is from this level of need that the emotional involvement comes (after all, nobody really gets totally emotional about words or ideological concepts as they stand on their own, but because of what the word or concept stands for, what it means to the person involved, how it relates to his wants and needs).

It can become well nigh impossible to resolve the argument when it stays at the seemingly logical, intellectual level, because what is irresolvable is happening at the level of more personal wants and needs. So the first step in resolving this kind of conflict is to provide a safe context in which people feel able to speak from the vulnerable needs or personal meanings that are under their logical argument. This is where the Interpersonal Focusing method comes in. Much the same as in an individual counseling session, where one person helps another to find words for feeling by setting aside his own opinion for a moment, empathic listening can be used to create an atmosphere of safety in groups, where the “meaning” and needs behind the words can be verbalized. When this begins to happen, creative, alternative solutions, ways of meeting the needs of everyone, begin to arise. Let me give an example (from the 1970s!):

I was at a meeting of a group of people who lived collectively, and, more importantly, who raised the community children collectively. It was agreed among these people that they would only have as many children as they could manage to support at any period in their development as a community. At the present meeting, it was decided that the community could take responsibility for one more child. There were several women who wanted to conceive children; there were several other people who wanted to adopt a child, because they felt a sense of responsibility for the children that were already in the world (if such a community discussion seems far-fetched to you, imagine the same decision being made between husband and wife, which it sometimes is, and then extrapolate to the group situation).

There had been discussion of pros and cons on both sides and, in general, people were agreed that a child would be conceived now and, at the next opportunity, a child would be adopted. However, one woman was not satisfied with this decision. As she argued for adoption now, it was evident that she was very emotionally involved in the decision, that it was deeply meaningful for her somehow. The group could have simply accepted a majority vote at this time. Instead, someone decided to respond to the woman in a listening way. He asked, "May I listen to you?" and when she said "Yes", he began by gently asking her to feel into the feeling that she was having and to make words from it. As she spoke, he reflected what she was saying and asked her to say more when needed.

As the woman focused, she moved away from the anger and vehemence of her argument and into a soft place of tears. Basically, this is what came from that place:

The intensity of her feeling was around the fact that she was old (she was in her late sixties) and that she had never been a mother. She felt within herself a strong need to respond to another human with a mother's love. It was her feeling, and had been her experience with other community children, that there was a special bond between these children and their biological mothers (no matter how much the collective philosophy said this shouldn't be true) which somehow got in the way of her own wanting to open her "mothering" feeling toward them. She felt that, with an adopted child upon whom no one would have a special hold, she would be able to experience this other kind of "mothering" feeling, and she wanted to do this before it was too late (before she died).

Many people in the group were moved to tears of empathy as the woman spoke. In the ensuing discussion, each of the women who was waiting to conceive a child basically said that she could understand the other's feeling, and that, since she was young, and since there had been other reasons on the side of adopting, she was willing to wait another year or two before conceiving. With some careful attention to make sure this was really all right with everyone and not just a giving in to social pressure, it was decided by the group to adopt a child now and to conceive one later. The younger women did not feel badly about the decision; they felt glad to be involved in a meaningful life event for the older woman and okay about waiting until later for their own particular experience.

This example could have worked out another way. It could have happened that, as the older woman was able to get in touch with and to articulate the place of meaning underneath her vehemence, she may have found that this was enough. She may have experienced some kind of felt shift in that place of meaning and might have said: "Actually, now that I know where all that feeling is coming from, I can think of other ways to deal with it. I think it would work if I could just talk with T \_\_\_\_\_ (the woman who was to conceive the next child) about my inhibited feeling, and get it clear between us that I can love this new child like a mother." If T \_\_\_\_\_ had agreed to this, then the initial decision went (to conceive now) could have held. The point is not which

way the decision went (there isn't a "right" or "wrong" in such conflicts of need) but that, because of a few moments of listening attention, in either case a decision was reached which was really all right with everyone. If it had not been resolved in this way, what might have happen historically? The older woman might have left the community, unable to get her needs met (Too often the way of resolution in our culture); she might have gone along with the decision on the surface, but felt a lingering sense of loss or bitterness and withdrawn her emotional investment from the group; she might have stirred up open resentment and conflict throughout the next few years of the group's life.

The "felt senses" behind emotions are one kind of feeling which must have room at decision-making meetings. Another kind of "feeling" is the "intuition" –not a personal, emotionally felt want or need, but a preverbal grasp of a solution, a not-yet verbalized sense about what the group could do. "Intuitions" are felt senses, feelings without words. Just like more emotional feelings, they can greatly profit from the possibility of being made into words through empathic listening.

Intuitions are perhaps the greatest source of creative solutions to conflict. Like any felt sense, an intuition is a bodily registering of more information than could ever be considered consciously at one time. As a person sits at a meeting, listening to discussion, an intuition can form as he takes in all of the various wants and needs expressed by the group, relating and combining and mulling them all in a preverbal way. Such an intuition, although articulated by one individual, is a reading of the whole group, including not just what has been said but what has been expressed non-verbally. When put into words, it will often contain important insights for the group decision.

##### **5. The Effects of Aggression and Competition**

Like any felt sense, an intuition can only form or come forth strongly if it can be focused upon (as in Chapter Four). If you think of group meetings you have attended, you will remember that, at many of them, participants compete aggressively for talking time, interrupting each other in order to acquire a chance to speak. In such an atmosphere, there are no quiet moments for focusing, no opportunities for getting in touch with the wealth of information carried in the body subconsciously. At such meetings, the possibilities for finding creative new solutions are greatly curtailed. The same points will be discussed over and over; issues become polarized.

Chief among the norms of listening decision-making is the ban upon interruptions. If speaking turns are acquired by interrupting, then the most aggressive and competitive group members will occupy the greatest amount of speaking time and thereby wield the most power to influence decisions. Quieter group members, who also often turn out to be the most "intuitive", or the closest to their felt sense of situations, will seldom find the opportunity to express their ideas. This becomes particularly true for the more intuitive ideas, which come without words to begin with and can never be voiced in the highly competitive atmosphere. Any pause to attempt to focus and to make words for the preverbal will immediately be seized upon as a chance to grab the turn by an aggressive competitive speaker.

In a group where competition is the method for acquiring turns, those individuals who are quickest with words and most aggressive in interrupting others will come to monopolize the greatest part of the speaking time. Social psychology research (Hastorf, 1968; Riecken, 1958) has shown that the power to influence group decisions is directly correlated with the amount of speaking time, that is, the people who manage to grab the most turns and to talk the longest are those who have power in the group.

Yet there is no reason to believe that such aggressiveness in grabbing time is necessarily correlated with having the best ideas! In fact, from what has been said above about the role of Focusing and intuition in creativity, it can be assumed that the opposite will often be true – that the creative solution will be in the hands (or mouth!) of a lower frequency, more pre-verbal and intuitive thinker but never have a chance to be verbalized in the highly competitive group.

And, in fact, social psychology research (Shaw, 1962, 1961; Shaw & Penrod, 1962) has shown that, even when a person is secretly given the information needed for solving an experimental group problem, the group will fail to hear that information and solve the problem unless the person with the information is one of the recognized high frequency talkers in the group.

Research (Hoffman, Burke, & Maier, 1965; Oakes, Droge & August, 1960; Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939) has also shown that, while some people may not need to talk as much as some other people, they need to feel that they had the opportunity to influence the group decision as much as they wanted to in order to feel satisfied with the decision and motivated to act to carry it through.

In a listening decision-making group, there is a prohibition upon interruptions, upon acquiring speaking time through aggression. Turn-taking is moderated by a process monitor, and everyone has an equal chance to ask for a turn and to speak without interruption. In this way, each person has as much opportunity as he wants to attempt to influence the decision, and each should then feel satisfied with it and motivated to carry it out. The prohibition upon interruptions also guarantees the time needed for Focusing upon and making words for intuitive felt senses and thereby maximizes the possibility of discovering creative solutions.

## 6. **Efficiency and Time**

A group decision is only as good as the motivation and commitment of group members to carry it out. No matter how eloquent the logical arguments and persuasions, no matter how firm the silencing of the minority, a decision will not be carried out (at least by participants in a voluntary group) unless it meets the wants and needs of group members. If a decision is made which ignores the wants and needs of a substantial minority of participants, the planned action will fail, and the whole problem will have to be discussed and decided again. So the time taken to listen emphatically to wants and needs and strong feelings in the first place will be repaid later on.

One of the greatest objections to consensual decision-making has been a fear about the amount of time it will take. And, in fact, it may sometimes initially take more time than majority vote. However, given the higher quality, more creative solutions and the greater feelings of responsibility, commitment, and motivation which can be generated through consensus, it can be seen that initial time spent arriving at a consensual decision will be more than repaid by the efficiency with which the decision will be carried out. In many non-consensual groups I have participated in, time and again decisions have been made hastily and then reappeared on the agenda to be remade two weeks later. So much information had been left out that action had been impossible, or, worse yet, so few people had been motivated to carry out the action that no one showed up to do the work!

Listening and Focusing in combination with consensus can also actually shorten the time needed to make a decision. Just as in individual listening turns, when a person can focus upon a felt sense and get listening help in making words for it, he will often experience a felt shift. A position that was frozen and stuck becomes fluid again and can change. In a decision-making group, this means that a polarization or rigidity of position, which might have kept the group in conflict for weeks, can be resolved or loosened up and made more flexible through a few minutes of listening

In a listening, consensual decision-making group, there is no coercion by enforced time pressures to make a decision before a consensus arises. There is a time limit for the length of a meeting (participants are not expected to stay all night, nor are they asked to forego other equally important activities, such as listening turns or socializing time, in order to continue a business meeting). But it is understood that, if a decision cannot be reached in the time allotted for it, the decision can be postponed to another meeting set up for further discussion.

If an action must be taken before another meeting can be held, consensus can often be reached on the decision to act in a particular way this one time, on the condition that a future discussion will be held to come to a true consensus on a long-term policy. However, the attitude among consensual decision0makers is that, often, inaction is better than hasty, non-consensual action. Non-consensus is taken as indicating that the planned action is apt to fail, either because the plan overlooks important information or because it will fail to motivate enough people to insure its completion.

Consensual decision-making may not fit every group. It demands as a prerequisite that the participants care about each other and be committed to the group and the projects which are being attempted. It is not likely to work well in hierarchical situations where one or more people have actual organizational power over other people and have a vested interest in maintaining and using that power coercively. In such a situation, where his promotion or salary may be affected by the degree to which he agrees or disagrees with those having power over him, a person will not be free to explore and express this feelings openly and should not be asked to do so.

However, consensus can be used within a hierarchically structured organization if the manager at a given level is truly willing to divest himself of coercive power over the group for which he has direct responsibility, to take responsibility for carrying the group decisions to other levels of the organization, and to discuss openly with the group any problems which arise because of his dual position, so that the group can arrive at consensual decisions for dealing with the problems.

Such decisions, in being consensual, would have to meet the special needs of the manager as well as of the other group members and would not lead him into actions which do not work for him personally. Such problems include, for example, the need for such a manager to make snap decisions during some interactions with the hierarchy, without the feasibility of going back to the group to achieve consensus first. However, problems of salary, promotion, allocation of work can be solved consensually and non-competitively through open and cooperative attention to the needs of each participant.

However, we need not solve all of the problems of consensus within hierarchical organizations at this point (see Dr. McGuire's 2006 article "Collaborative Edge Decision Making", available at [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com) , for a method, called "Coordinated Collaboration," which allows for time-limited collaborative decision making within the needs of hierarchical organizations). It need only be clear that, in a listening, supportive community, where peer counseling is the norm, egalitarian, consensual decision-making is a suitable model.

## **7. Flexibility of Decisions**

The emphasis in cooperative decision making is the creation of solutions that meet the needs of human beings, not abstract ideals or economic production. The social forms created do not stand alone, do not become rigid institutions which then turn around and shape and deform the needs of the human beings who come after they have been create. The forms created in consensual decision-making are created for the purpose of carrying forward individual needs.

When a form no longer fits group needs or as group participants change, the form is discarded, and a new one is created by listening to the needs of the human beings involved. The forms are then life-giving. They serve to carry forward the felt experiencing of the participants. They are like a shell of the hermit crab that will be discarded when the crab has grown larger.

Forms are damaging only when they are kept beyond their purpose and become an end in themselves, an entrapping shell that limits the natural growth of the organism and eventually kills or stunts it. Like good reflections of feeling and good focusing instructions, forms arrived at through consensus, and continuously revised to meet the needs of individual participants, allow the human body to breathe and to remain in process, ever changing (Gendlin, 1981)

## **8. How To Run A Meeting**

**Shared leadership:** Rather than concentrating a lot of authority in the hands of one person, group leadership is broken down into a number of specific tasks, and the different tasks are assigned to different people. In this way, no one has too much power, and many people are encouraged to perceive themselves as responsible for the group process (It was at steering committee meetings, planning the 1981 Association for Women in Psychology Conference, Boston, MA, where I first saw tasks divided among a Chairperson, a minutes maker, and a time keeper, as well as a process monitor).

So, at the beginning of the meeting, participants volunteer for the following tasks (Table 6.1):

**Agenda keeper:** This person is primarily concerned with getting the work of the meeting done. He is responsible for collecting items for the agenda, getting the group to prioritize the items (determine the order in which the items will be considered) and to agree on tentative time limits for each item. Often, the agenda works out something like this

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Announcements can be covered in ten minutes  
(No discussion allowed).

SHORT ITEMS: Three or four items at five minutes discussion time each

LONG ITEMS: One or two at twenty minutes of discussion time each  
(Major Issues)

In a large meeting, the agenda keeper can also be responsible for keeping discussion centered on the topics on the agenda although, in a small meeting, group members can all be responsible for this themselves. The agenda keeper will also make sure that discussions about needs to renegotiate time limits or agenda priorities happen.

**Process monitor and alternate:** This person has primary responsibility for the process of the meeting – the way that people are talking to each other, rather than the content. He has three responsibilities:

- a. keeping a list of people who would like to speak and calling on them in the order in which they indicated the wish to speak. This becomes especially important at heated points in the discussion when, suddenly, everyone wants to speak at once.
- b. stopping anyone who interrupts a speaker and gently reminding him that there are no interruptions allowed and that he can be placed on the turn list by indicating a wish for a turn.
- c. insuring that listening responses are used where appropriate, e.g., if a group member starts to argue vehemently with the position of another, the monitor might ask the second speaker first to be sure that the first speaker's position was fully understood by trying to paraphrase what

the first speaker has said. Or, the process monitor might ask someone to ask a speaker to say more and to reflect to enable a position to be explored fully.

**Alternate process monitor** takes over whenever the official process monitor wishes to participate in the discussion instead of watching. The process monitor needs the objectivity that comes from being relatively outside of any heated discussion, so, if the first one needs to join in, the alternate takes over.

**Time keeper:** This person is concerned with the passage of time at the meeting. The time keeper needs a watch, probably with a second hand.

He:

- insures that no one monopolizes the floor by taking excessively long turns. The group should decide on a maximum time for speaking turns prior to the meeting (three minutes is usually more than enough time for an uninterrupted turn), and the time keeper will gently enforce that time limit.
- keeps time for each agenda item as allotted, warns the group a minute or two before the time is up, and insists that discussion stop on a particular item when the time has expired, unless the group renegotiates and assigns more time to the item. This usually means agreeing to take time away from something else.

**Minutes maker:** This person makes notes of important points raised at meetings and is especially concerned with writing down the decisions which emerge.

**Group Responsibilities (Table 6.2)** : Although there are specific people appointed to look after certain tasks, any group member is able and welcome to say, “I think we should pay attention to our time dimensions”, or, “Wait. Don’t interrupt her; let her finish” or, “I want to reflect what you said to make sure that I understand it” or, “It seems Sally’s been waiting for a turn an awfully long time. Are you sure she’s on the list?” More specific responsibilities of members include:

- (a) **indicating the wish for a turn:** In any but the smallest, most slow-paced group, the issue of turn-taking will arise. In peaceful moment of decision-making, turn-taking can pass easily from one person to the next. However, as soon as the pace speeds up, and speakers find themselves becoming nervous about how they will get a chance to speak, turn-taking should pass to the process-monitor. A group member can at any point indicate to the process monitor the wish to speak, by raising a finger or hand, or by saying, “I’d like a turn soon.” This indication, if given quietly, can be done even while someone else is speaking, as long as it doesn’t interrupt or detract from the speaker’s turn.

- (b) **asking for reflection**: At any point, a speaker may ask to have his or her words reflected as in a regular listening turn. This is especially helpful if the speaker is trying to find words for an intuitive feeling.
- (c) **Focusing**: A group member should take responsibility for noticing when he is having a lot of emotional investment or reaction, and for attempting to use Intuitive Focusing on The Creative Edge, the “intuitive feel,” and to ask himself, “What’s this all about?” and see what comes. The Focusing can be done quietly to oneself, or a group member can ask for a turn in which he would use Focusing while being reflected by another. At times, especially if the feeling being aroused seems more related to his own past history than to the decision being made by the group, or if it seems it will take a long time of Listening to find words for the feeling, the person will take responsibility either for setting the feeling aside until a later Listening turn or for asking someone to go with him for Listening at the moment in another room.
- (d) **reflecting others**: Group members should take responsibility for offering Pure Reflection the words of others, especially if, as listeners, they feel that the point was complicated and/or likely to be misinterpreted or if there is evidence that it has already been misunderstood.
- (e) **asking for more**: Similarly, group members should ask to hear more about a speaker’s idea until it has been fully understood.

## **9. Alternative Procedures (When The Going Gets Rough) (Table 6.3)**

If decision-making meetings are to be consensual and to place a priority upon room for everyone’s “intuitive sensing,” yet not to last eternally, participants have to be very creative and disciplined in thinking about structures that will maximize a given time frame. The following are some alternative procedures which can be used to facilitate the decision-making process at various points (See MNS, Quakers, Reevaluation Co-Counseling literature listed as Suggested Readings):

(a) **Group Focusing**: Group Focusing (Boukydis, C., 1979) instructions can be used at any time when it is important for every group member to get a “felt sense” of his or her “intuitive feel” about an issue. Such Focusing is especially helpful prior to a meeting or a particular agenda item or during times of great difficulty and conflict, when everyone is talking at once. Simply have someone give simple Focusing Instructions, e.g., A SHORT RELAXATION EXERCISE: “Close your eyes and turn your attention inward . . . slowly let go off all of the tensions and involvements of the moment. . .” and AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: “Now ask yourself, ‘What’s central to me about \_\_\_\_\_ (the issue under discussion)?’ and wait quietly to see what comes.”” Then FIND WORDS OR AN IMAGE: “Now find some words or an image that capture that intuitive knowing.” After Focusing, discussion can go on as before, or, if it seems important to hear the opinion of each person on the issue, Focusing can be followed by a “think-and-listen”.

**TABLE 6.1**

**SHARED LEADERSHIP AT MEETINGS**

Volunteers are needed for the following roles:

(a) agenda keeper:

- collects and prioritizes agenda items
- assigns suggested time limits
- keeps discussion on topic

(b) process monitor:

- monitors turn-taking
- stops interruptions
- insures use of listening response

alternate process monitor

- takes over when the process monitor wishes to join the discussion

(c) time keeper:

- enforces maximum limit for a speaking turn
- keeps time as allotted for agenda items
- insures that time limits for items are respected or renegotiated

(d) minutes maker:

- notes important points in discussion
- keeps a list of decisions made

**TABLE 6.2**  
**GROUP MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES**  
**AT MEETINGS**

- (a) indicating a wish for a turn
- (b) asking for reflection
- (c) using Intuitive Focusing
- (d) reflecting others
- (e) asking for more

## TABLE 6.3

### ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES (WHEN THE GOING GETS ROUGH)

(a) Group Focusing:

a short relaxation exercise followed by an open-ended question and a chance to find words or an image for the problem.

(b) Think-and -listen:

a short, uninterrupted turn for each person to say his thoughts on a particular issue

(c) Brainstorming:

throwing out for consideration every idea that comes to mind, no censoring by anyone

(d) Dyads, triads, and small groups:

breaking up into smaller units during heated discussion, so that everyone can have time to explore his feelings

(e) Third person processing:

having one person serve as a listening facilitator for a disagreement between two others

(f) The “other room”

always keeping in mind that a pair or more of people can always split off from the meeting and go into another room to meet some need which isn't being met in the larger meeting

(b) **Think-and-listen** (I first experienced the “think-and-listen” format at meetings of the re-evaluation co-counseling community. I believe it is similar to the consensual decision-making method of the Quakers): In a “think-and-listen”, each group member has a chance to say his thoughts with total acceptance by the others without comment, discussion, criticism, or interruption. Go around in a circle, each participant having an uninterrupted turn to speak (you can set a time limit if you like), the rest of the group simply listening. Speakers may refer to the idea of others within their own turn, but no one can question or start a discussion with a speaker during that person’s turn. The think-and-listen often leads to the discovery of new information and a solution to conflict.

(c) **Brain storming**: This is the traditional technique from business management where people are allowed to throw out any idea, this time without even censoring or criticizing within themselves. Anything goes. Usually a group sets aside about fifteen minutes on a very specific problem or issue (e.g., “What event could we sponsor to raise some money?”; “What should we name ourselves?”; “To whom should we send our mailing?”). People generate as many ideas as they can, either writing them down individually or saying them aloud while one group member writes them down. Afterwards, the group can go through and choose the ideas that seem most useful and discuss them in the usual way.

(d) **Listening/Focusing in dyads, triads, and small groups**: When an issue is one where many people have important wants involved, everyone will have feelings, and everyone will want to register an opinion. Hands will be flying up all around, and the process monitor’s list of people awaiting turns will grow long and confused. This intensity of feeling and response is an indication that it might be a good idea to split down into smaller groups. In the smaller groups, each person can work through the tension and anxiety until he can find the right words for the legitimate need behind the emotion. It is essential that emotional investment not be ignored but seen as the source of important meanings. The Listening/Focusing turns in pairs, threes, or small groups are a good way of getting to the roots of the issue for many people in a short period of time. One-half hour may be plenty of time to set aside for dyads; forty-five minutes for triads, and one hour for groups of four. After the Listening/Focusing turns, the large group can reform and people can share their more clear understanding of their feelings, either in a think-and-listen or using the structure for regular consensual discussion.

(e) **Interpersonal Focusing**: In Chapter Five, you learned how a third person as a Listening facilitator can be helpful in resolving interpersonal conflicts. The same structure can be used when an intense conflict seems based on a simple misunderstanding; a group member can volunteer to be a third person on the spot, reflecting first one person and then the other until the issue is resolved. However, if a long-standing personality clash or a deep seated disagreement is involved, it may make more sense in terms of group economy to set the agenda item aside until a later date, if necessary, and arrange for a third person to meet with the two for a longer session some time during the week.

(f) **The “other room”**: It’s important to realize that the whole group does not have to get bogged down by every feeling that arises in any individual. Sometimes, an individual will be able to sense that his emotional reaction is based on a more personal need or a life situation outside of the group. In such a case, that person might ask if someone in the group would be willing to go off in another room to give him some listening time. Often, after a relatively short turn (fifteen to twenty minutes) the person will be ready to rejoin the group. Of course, if no one is able or willing to leave the common meeting to go into the “other room”, then the individual will have to decide whether to leave the meeting and go elsewhere to get needs met or to set the personal issue aside (if possible) and participate in the decision-making meeting. But, often there is another person who is quite willing to leave the meeting to provide emergency support.

A decision-making meeting is not the same as a therapy group. Sensitivity to emotions is given for two reasons: 1. It remains true, even during business, that participants are human beings, and, if they are hurting, some care and empathic concern should of course be given. Human beings remain a priority over business, although the many structures described above provide ways of giving support with consideration for group economy. 2. It is believed theoretically that, often, the most creative and necessary material for decision-making will come from using Intuitive Focusing to articulate the “intuitive feel” underlying participants’ emotions and intuitions.

However, the task of the group remains that of getting through the agenda or at least making conscious, time-oriented choices about what decisions can and cannot be set aside until later. Keeping in mind that the group can always split into sub-groups with different functions (a couple of people in another room working on feelings, while the rest of the group goes on with the agenda, for instance) allows support and business to get done.

The “other room” strategy applies mainly when the feeling aroused is not about the issue or the group process, but a personal concern unrelated to the group.

A group would not try to use Robert’s Rules for Order or Modern Parliamentary Procedure without first learning how to use them. The same is true of listening decision-making. While the method is aimed at allowing people to remain human beings during decision-making, it is not “structureless”. The structures are aimed at allowing the flow of feeling and human meaningfulness at meetings. They are structures, nonetheless, and must be learned and practiced in a disciplined way just as reflection of feelings and focusing improve with practice. You can expect some bumpy and possibly frustrating moments as you learn to use cooperative decision-making norms at meetings. My suggestion: start out with short meetings and relatively small decisions.

## **10. How a Meeting Might Look**

As an example of the flow of meeting process, a hypothetical meeting of a small (10 persons) Listening/Focusing Community is presented below:

- During the “Announcements” time at a regular 7:00 p.m. listening meeting, Pat announces that she would like to have a planning meeting the next week to discuss some needs around formal teaching that she has. Mark says that he would also like to talk about recruiting new members for the group. It is agreed that those interested will come 45 minutes before the regular meeting for a planning session.

- The next week at 6:15 p.m., Pat, Mark, Sally and Ken arrive for the planning session.

- First, people volunteer for the various leadership functions. Since she is not very interested in the topics, Sally volunteers to be the process monitor. Ken will be the alternate. Pat will be the agenda keeper; Mark will be both time keeper and the minutes maker.

- The agenda keeper asks if there are any announcements. There are none. Short issues? None. Long issues? Pat’s “formal teaching”, Mark’s “new members”. They decided to allot 20 minutes for discussion of each issue.

- Pat presents her concern: She would like to start a Listenin/Focusing community where she works, but feels uncertain about her ability to explain the theory behind peer counseling. Since Sally is knowledgeable about the theory, Pat would like her to suggest some readings and to do a presentation on the theory.

- Since Sally is now involved in the discussion, Ken takes over as process monitor.

- Sally asks for a minute or two to Focus on her feelings about taking on this new responsibility. “She sits quietly, eyes closed, paying attention to her body sense about taking over. After a few minutes of quiet attention to her feelings, she states that she feels fine about suggesting some reading, but would like someone else to type up the list, make Xerox copies of the list and of the articles, and be responsible for passing the articles out and collecting money for the Xeroxing.

- Pat volunteers to do the typing and Xeroxing, but wants someone else to pass the articles out.

- No one volunteers. Mark says that, since it was Pat’s idea, she should do all of the work.

- Pat interrupts to say that she thinks the work will be good for everyone. Mark starts to argue back.

- Ken, as process monitor, intervenes, saying, “Wait. You’re interrupting each other. Let’s take a minute to focus and then listen to each of you.”

- Pat and Mark Focus quietly for a minute, then Pat lays out her “intuitive sensing” as Ken reflects. Mainly, she discovers that she feels she is often the one to bring up new ideas, that the rest of the group is passive, and then she ends up doing all of the work. Ken then reflects Mark for a few minutes as Mark uses Focusing. Mark says he is actually glad that Pat had the idea, but he doesn’t want to take on more work because he wants to put his energy into his “new members” need.

- Sally says to Mark as time keeper, “How are we doing for time?” Mark checks his watch and says, “We have 8 minutes left for this issue.”

- Sally says: “I have an idea. Pat, why don’t you just bring the Xeroxes to the general meeting and put them on the table with a cash box and announce that people should pick up articles and leave the money. Then, group members can be responsible for doing it themselves.” Pat checks inside for a minute, then says, “That seems fine.”

- It’s fine with everyone else, and Mark, as minute maker, writes down the decision. He also announces that it’s almost time to move to the next issue.

- Sally indicates to Ken as process monitor that she needs a turn. Ken gives her the floor.

- Sally says she needs a minute to talk about the issue of her presenting on theory, and asks if they can stay with the issue another five minutes. As agenda keeper, Pat asks Mark if he is willing to give up five minutes of his time for the membership issue. Mark says that it’s okay with him.

- Sally says that when she imagines giving a presentation on theory, she feels pressured, like it would take her a long time to prepare it. Pat reflects her. Sally says she thinks people know more than they think, and that she would rather lead a “think-and-listen” on theory. During the presentation she would be willing to lead short issue-oriented Focusing Instructions on questions of theory, like, “Why do you think it’s important to reflect instead of giving your own opinion?” Then she would keep time while each member of the group has an uninterrupted chance to say his or her thoughts on the issue.

- Pat says, “That seems fine. Then I’ll become more confident by attempting to put my thoughts into words in front of the group.”

- Sally says she’s willing to lead such a presentation two weeks from tonight.

- Once again, Mark writes down the decision, and says it’s time to move on to the next issue.

- Sally takes over as process monitor again, and Pat, as agenda keeper, invites Mark to state the issue

- Mark asks Ken to listen to him so that he can use Focusing to get his thoughts clear. Ken reflects as Mark speaks. Mark focuses on his “intuitive feel” about wanting new members and gets help for making words for it. Basically, he discovers that he has a need to meet some new people, especially in hope of finding a woman he can relate to in a Listening way. He wishes the Listening/Focusing community could have a bigger turnover of interested people so that he can have a chance of filling this need.

- Pat says that’s okay with her except it’s important to her that women who come not feel besieged by men seeking relationships since that happen to women all of the time and a Listening/Focusing Community should be safe from that.

- Mark says he understands that feeling, and certainly will not put any pressure on anyone, but wants at least the chance of getting his need met. They agree that, if Pat feels he is pressuring anyone, she will say so to him, and they will do third person processing on the issue if it arises.

- Sally says it’s okay with her (Ken implicitly takes over as process monitor), but, again, she doesn’t want to do any of the work. If Mark wants new members, he should find a way to advertise and should make sure there’s a “new people’s group” to introduce newcomers to Listening and Focusing. Mark indicates to Ken (as process monitor) that he would like a chance to speak soon.

- Pat starts to speak, but Ken says: “Wait a minute. Mark is next, then you.” Mark (as time keeper) also says, “We only have five minutes left.” Sally takes over as process monitor again.

- Mark says he’s happy to advertise but would like some help. He’s also glad to lead the “new people’s group”, since that will give him a good chance to meet people

- Ken volunteers to help Mark with advertising, because he’d like more people too. The two agree to meet sometime during the week to work on a flier.

- Mark writes down the decision and also the agreement between him and Pat to watch for the “pressure” issue and process it if it arises.

- At the 7 p.m. general listening meeting, Mark announces the decisions to the rest of the group: that readings will be available for the cost of Xeroxing, that Mark and Ken will be working on a flyer to find new members, and that Mark is willing to lead a “new people’s group” for anyone who comes.

- Paula says she has concerns about attracting too many “heavy people” through advertising, and she agrees to meet with Mark and Ken to come up with ways of doing it which feel okay with her.

- Sally announces that she will lead a “think-and-listen” on theory two weeks from tonight.

If your group is large enough to need consensual decision-making meetings, then you are well on the way in the transition from listening exchange to helping community. Chapter Seven tells how to make this transition.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

The following groups have all put energy into devising alternative methods of decision-making. You might write to any of them, asking for available literature:

1. Movement for a New Society  
4722 Baltimore Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19143  
[www.newsociety.com](http://www.newsociety.com)
  
2. American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers)  
2161 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, MA 02140  
  
(Especially a manual entitled Consensus Decision-Making,  
written by MartinCobin, copyright The Sisters of Loretto, 1979.)
  
3. The Re-Evaluation Co-Counseling Community  
C/O Rational Island Publishers  
P.O.Box 2081, Main Office Station  
Seattle, WA 98111  
[www.rc.org](http://www.rc.org)
  
4. Marshall Rosenberg  
  
C/O Center for Non-Violent Communication  
2428 Foothill Boulevard, Suite E, La Crescenta, CA, 91214  
[www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)

## PART THREE

### BUILDING SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### FROM SUPPORT GROUP TO HELPING COMMUNITY

The following chapter has been written by both Zack Boukydis and Kathy McGuire. In its essence, it represents the learning they came upon in the collaborative endeavor of starting several Listening/Focusing communities. It was important to them to be able to work as a team, as “co-founders”, able to support each other and to discuss issues and problems which arise in building community. We strongly suggest that you also find a trusted friend or colleague to work with you as you attempt to build community.

##### 1. Incorporating New Members

(Revising in 2007, I want to emphasize again that there is now an international network of certified Listening/Focusing Trainers who can offer introductory, or Level One, training in the Listening and Focusing skills needed for Focusing Partnerships, Focusing Groups, and Focusing Communities. Listings of certified Trainers can be found at [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) and [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com).

Many established Changes Focusing Groups now require that new members take the Level 1 20-hour course in Focusing Partnership to learn the skills needed in the self-help Focusing Group, and I recommend this supervised foundation as a great basis for the beginning of a new Listening/Focusing Group.

Secondly, in the 2000s, support groups are often started and facilitated by a helping professional, often under the auspices of a hospital or other organization. Support group facilitators can take at least Level 1 Listening/Focusing Partnership training from a certified Focusing Trainer of [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) or [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com). Ideally, they might continue with Levels 2-4, perhaps becoming certified Focusing Trainers themselves. Then, they can first incorporate Focused Listening and Intuitive Focusing into the group by modeling these skills themselves. Then, when the group is ready, they can teach group members the Focusing Partnership method to increase skills and self-reliance.

Thirdly, whether support groups then go on to become free-standing peer-lead Focusing Groups or Focusing Communities will depend upon the comfort level of the sponsoring helping professionals or organizations.

It would be wonderful if every community had at least one free-standing Focusing Community where people who had finished with a particular support group or therapeutic

experience could go on to continue Listening/Focusing partnerships within the supportive structure of a Focusing Group or Focusing Community

And, last but certainly not least, while in the 1970s the emphasis was upon communes, community, collectives, collaboratives as an alternative to bureaucratic, hierarchical structures, now the ideas of collaboration and team work have entered the mainstream culture. For emotional support, we have myriads of support groups such as the 12-step programs. And, in the corporate and organizational world, we have a greater understanding of the need for collaboration and team work in the creation of flexible, innovative, highly-responsive organizations that can constantly respond at The Creative Edge. So, now the workplace must also function as a community, able to incorporate a diversity of skills and talents into creative teams. My latest work at Creative Edge Focusing™ ([www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)) also incorporates Focusing Partnership, Focusing Group/Team and Focusing Community concepts into businesses and organizations, for creative thinking and problem solving as well as for emotional support.)

If you have been practicing listening with several others for ten or so weeks, you now have a core Focusing Group from which you can build to a larger Focusing Community, if you wish. If you have made the decision to open your doors to “anyone who wants to come” or to the members of some larger organization to which you belong, you can move to acquiring new members through advertising. As new members join the group, they can be given the manual to read, if appropriate, and can be taught basic Focused Listening and Intuitive Focusing skills by old members.

If a larger number of new members arrive at once, you might do a ten-week Listening/Focusing Class with them, pretty much in the way that you first started your own core group, mixing in old members with the new as the old are willing. If only one or two new members arrive at a time, you might simply incorporate them into existing triads or small groups and teach them as you go along. Some old members will want to spend time and energy teaching new members; others may not want to do so, preferring to come to meetings and exchange Focusing Partnership turns with practiced partners. Through consensual decision-making, your group will develop its own most comfortable way of incorporating new members. The essential thing is that newcomers be given the opportunity to learn the Listening and Focusing skills adequately.

## 2. **What A Meeting Might Look Like**

As you make the transition from an informal “listening exchange” to a Focusing Community, you may want to flesh out your meetings with some additional activities. While the order of events and the time allotted to each will vary with your own group’s wants and needs, we find the following structure useful (Table 7.1):

- a) **Pre-meeting planning meeting**: called whenever necessary for those interested in participating in a particular decision. This meeting takes place one-half hour before the community meeting.

b) **News and goods** (The “news and goods” idea is borrowed from the reevaluation co-counseling community structure): A short go-around where people have a few minutes each to catch the whole group up on meaningful events, good and bad, that have happened to them since the last time they attended. We have found it useful to remind people that they can share good things here as well as those that are hard (since the later listening/focusing turns more often revolve around the harder things).

We also usually find that we have to set a time limit for turns, or else “news and goods” has a tendency to stretch out over the whole night! Our latest method is to put a three minute egg-timer in the middle of the group. Whoever is ready and willing takes the timer, inverts it and keeps track as it measures his or her turn. The timer passes to the left or right and on around the group, as each person has a turn.

If your group is larger than ten people, you may want to split into two groups for “news and goods” to save time. However, “news and goods” is one of the few times when everyone is sure to meet as a large group, and we find it important and powerful as a way of keeping the community bonded together as a whole. It has not been unusual in our experience for community members to travel just to participate in “news and goods” and then leave to go home again, when they were in a situation where they really didn’t have time for listening but also couldn’t stand to miss the opportunity to keep connected with everyone’s lives.

c) **Announcements**: A short time where people can announce things they need or opportunities they know of or things they have to offer. In some communities, “announcements” happen after “news and goods” and before “socializing”, so that people who need to connect after a particular announcement can do so during socializing time.

Some typical announcements: “The Museum of Art has a great Picasso show and I’m going next Tuesday. If you want to come along, see me during the break.” “I’m looking for a job. My skills involve computer work, and I’d like to work in a small, warm environment. If you know of anything, let me know.” “I have kittens to give away. If you want one, see me.” “I’d like to have a planning meeting next week to talk about rounding up some new members.” “I need help moving next Saturday. If you can help, give me a call. Free spaghetti dinner afterwards!” “I’m having a potluck dinner party next Saturday night. Sign up during break if you can bring something.”

d) **Socializing**: A five or ten minute break after announcements where people can connect, stretch, chat.

e) **Listening/Focusing turns**: At this point, people break up into pairs, triads or small groups to exchange Partnership turns, or to have a Focusing group.

In a small community of four to ten people, you will most often break into small groups of up to four people each, or into triads or pairs for longer turns. Then, split up the time equally and exchange Listening/Focusing turns. Someone can give short Focusing Instructions to the whole group before you break up. Plan a good hour and a half for the Focusing Partnership exchange, so that, even if you stay in a small group, each person can have at least a fifteen minute turn. Be sure to figure in five to ten minutes between turns for discussion.

Whenever there are one or more newcomers, one subgroup should be a “new people’s group”, where newcomers can have an initial experience of Listening and Focusing and can ask questions about the supportive community idea. You can come up with whatever structure fits your needs and the willingness of your group members to work with new members. Sometimes, one or two old members can go off with a newcomer and demonstrate Listening/Focusing. Or you may find it simpler to incorporate a new person into an existing small group, explaining as you go along and giving them an initial turn. Remember, as in Chapter Three, during initial turns learners should limit themselves only to the two basic kinds of responses, Pure Reflection and Asking For More.

As a community gets large and old, some people begin to meet in small groups or pairs during the week to get their Listening/Focusing needs met, so that, at the community meetings, they may choose to get together in subgroups around other interests, such as discussing readings about Listening and Focusing or combining Listening and Focusing with other approaches to personal growth.

f) **Presentations (Optional):** Presentations provides a time for group members, or invited others, to teach or offer an experience to other group members. Presentations may be a discussion of theory or a demonstration related to listening or focusing, but they can also be about anything else that a group member wants to share with the others. Examples of typical presentations:

Listening in Relationships, Massage, Square Dancing, a slide show of a member’s photography, Movement Focusing, Art Therapy, a think-and-listen on Focusing, etc. Presentations are open to everyone, but no one has to attend. A presentation can be announced one or two weeks ahead of time. Some large listening communities plan presentations several weeks in advance and use the announcement of presentations as one way to attract new members to meetings.

At Presentations, it is important that the audience use listening responses, just as they would be used to help clarify in counseling turns or at a decision-making meeting. Instead of the usual threatening, competitive atmosphere that can surround the sharing of ideas, assured of a supportive, listening audience.

**TABLE 7.1**

**OVERVIEW OF ONE POSSIBLE STRUCTURE  
FOR A COMMUNITY MEETING**

- A. Pre-meeting planning meeting (whenever called) ½ - 1 hour
- B. News and goods ½ hour
- C. Announcements 10 minutes
- D. Socializing 10 - 15 minutes
- E. Listening/Focusing turns 1 ½ hours
  - listening/focusing in pairs and small groups
  - listening/focusing instruction
  - small groups with special interests using  
Listening/Focusing
- F. Presentations (optional) 1 hour

Without Presentations, a community meeting can take only two hours, if everyone takes responsibility for moving from one segment of the meeting to the next. Two and one-half hours would be better. With a large community, it's good to allow three hours to leave room, not only for presentations, but also for the kinds of socializing and connecting needs that attract people to a large community.

The basic structure outlined above is only a suggested model which has grown up over the years: it is expected that your group will create its own structures to meet its own needs.

### 3. **“The Prime Mover”: Leadership Functions at Meetings**

Ideally, meetings could happen without any “leaders”, group participants being responsible for saying what they want and for monitoring the time to make sure that everything can be accomplished. However, we have found over the years that it helps to have someone who is officially “responsible” for keeping the meeting moving. It has simply been too hard to overcome the tendency for things to meander when no one is responsible. When no one is appointed, then the several group members who are good at attending to time vacillate between doing the work of keeping meetings moving, and becoming angry and resentful, and waiting for someone else to do it, and still becoming angry and resentful.

So, we have a responsibility called the “prime mover”. The job rotates from week to week, everyone having a chance. Sometimes, especially in new groups, people do not feel comfortable taking up the sole responsibility for being the “prime mover”. People can pair up to form a “prime mover team” and support each other in carrying out this function. The “prime mover”:

- announces that it's time for the meeting to begin.
- does a short introduction to Listening, Focusing, and the peer counseling model, and a short outline of the evening's activities, if there are any newcomers present.
- puts the egg-timer in the middle of the circle so that someone can choose to begin “news and goods” (or finds some equivalent way of timing turns).
- makes sure that group members stay within time limits.
- moves the group on to Announcements and Socializing at the appropriate times.
- calls the group together after Socializing and facilitates making decisions about how and if people want to split into subgroups.
- when appropriate, gives short Focusing Instructions to the whole group before splitting up.

- if there is only one small group for listening turns, the prime mover makes sure that the responsibility for timing the turns is rotated around the group, again, makes sure everyone gets a turn.
- if there are several small groups, each would be wise to appoint a “prime mover”.

As with the structure of group meetings, the description of the “prime mover” is only a suggested model; your community will consistently work out its own consensual ways of handling the organization of the meetings.

#### **4. Subgrouping**

Once a community becomes larger than ten or fifteen people, you will begin to deal with a need for subgrouping. While many people thrive on the opportunity to make new friends and to relate to all kinds of different people at a large community meeting, some people will also begin to express a need for consistency in some group, where they can build up a certain level of trust and relaxation.

A natural way to deal with this dual situation is through subgrouping. Consistent small groups can meet for Listening/Focusing turns or around any other common interest. They can be closed to new members except by invitation, or only when someone leaves the group, creating an empty space, or only once every six months—whatever structure the subgroup comes up with through its own consensual decision-making. (Such subgroups do not make decisions for the larger Listening/Focusing community, which only happens at open meetings where everyone who wants to can participate.) Subgroups may meet during the weekly community meeting or at other times during the week.

The existence of some closed subgroups will bring up issues of inclusion and exclusion which seem almost basic to the human condition. As in all aspects of a Listening/Focusing community, sensitivity to the feeling side is needed, and an openness and willingness to process any hurt feelings which arise and to look for a consensual decision to meet the needs of the people involved. Again, flexibility is the key word.

For instance, while ninety-five percent of the new members may have no desire at all to be part of an old, ongoing subgroup, there may be one person who wants very much to be part of an old, ongoing subgroup, there may be one person who wants very much to be part of that group. Listening, Interpersonal Focusing, and collaborative decision-making will lead to a solution. Perhaps, after hearing reasons, the subgroup will find a way to take in this one new member. Or, if this is not okay with people, maybe a couple of people from the subgroup will volunteer to help the excluded person to start a similar group where he or she can get the needs met. The important thing is to remain open to processing feelings and looking for creative solutions.

#### **5. Flexible Structures**

Again and again we have mentioned a need to let structures emerge from the needs of your group. A Listening/Focusing community will always be in flux, yet, like the kaleidoscope, it will not be completely unstructured and chaotic. It will have an ever-changing pattern of structures – a structure will emerge out of felt needs, serve to carry forward those needs for a while, then dissolve when it is no longer useful or when a new need is articulated. After a moment of flux or structurelessness, and a decision-making meeting to get in touch with felt needs again, a new structure will arise.

Every Listening/Focusing community will be unique from every other, and unique at different points in its history. The community will go along comfortable with certain structures until someone articulates a need or concern that isn't being taken into account. Then a decision-making meeting will be held among interested people, and a new structure, perfectly tailored to present needs, will arise. Such a pattern, from structure to moments of formless Focusing upon felt experiencing to structure again, is the mark of a flexible, growing organism.

Here are some examples of the wonderfully creative structures that have arisen during the life of a Listening/Focusing community:

--At a large, open-to-the-public community, people complained about the difficulty of being a new person coming into such a seemingly formless group. The solution: a rotating function called "the greeter". Each week someone would take responsibility for approaching and socializing with new people, helping them to feel at home.

--At the same community, people pointed to the situation where you come to the community in crisis, because you really need to be listened to, and there is a presentation, or announcements, or whatever else going on. The solution for this group: another rotating function, the "crisis" person. Each meeting at the beginning, one person would announce that she was available at any time for crisis counseling. If approached by someone needing immediate listening, she would either listen or find someone else who was willing to do it.

The solutions which arise will be some mixture of expressed needs and concerns and willingness of group members to make whatever effort is involved at a certain point in time. For instance, we might say ideally that everyone should be welcoming to new Members or should be sensitive to the need for crisis counseling – yet it is a fact that, in our group, some people are tired of always being open and can only stand to come if they don't have to face anyone new. Perhaps the reason that an expressed need for a "greeters" or "crisis" person has arisen at this point is because most everyone is too tired and so has stopped doing the function naturally.

By keeping closely attuned to the actual state of individual wants and energy, flexible structure-making can come up with a realistic form for each point in the community's life. When that structure isn't working any more, someone will complain or bring up an unanswered need, and a new structure can be created.

## **6. Teams for “Heavy Situations”**

(Revising in 2007, I want to add that, since the wonderful and large original Changes Listening/Focusing communities, where Eugene Gendlin (*Focusing*, 1981) often made presentations and many graduate students in psychology from the University of Chicago participated as both helpers and helpees, Focusing Communities have tended to be much smaller groups, organized more exclusively by groups of friends or participants in Level One Focusing Partnership workshops continuing on. So, the open door policy which the original Changes had, with its philosophical belief that everyone, including ex-convicts and schizophrenics, is no longer typical. However, in any Focusing Group or Community, a member can suddenly be caught in a “heavy situation” (discovery of breast cancer or other illness, divorce, death of a loved one, loss of a job, Ph.D. dissertation work, writing a book, etc.) and want or need a “team” for support. So, the “team” concept remains a viable part of the supportive Listening/Focusing community model)

If your community is open to anyone who wants to come, then you must be prepared to deal with some heavy situations that may come your way. For a long time, and as much as possible, those involved in listening communities have avoided labeling any people as more “needy” or less healthy” or more “schizophrenic” than anyone else. Partly, we feel that these labels become self-fulfilling prophecies – if you think of some people as ‘sick” then you will treat them in certain ways and they will think of themselves in certain ways that will lead them to be unable to be responsible for themselves and other people.

It has also been our experience that people don’t fit their labels: if you watch in an open way, you see that sometimes the so-called “schizophrenic” is being more sensitive, in touch, and helpful than anyone else, that sometimes you, or some other paragon of “healthiness”, feels totally overwhelmed and crazy. As described in Chapter Five, we also see inter-personal problems as an interaction: something about another person that bothers me may not affect another person adversely in the least. So, let’s try to stay away from labels for people.

However, we have had to acknowledge that there are some situations that are “heavy”. Heavy situations often revolve around a particular person’s interactions with the group. So, for a while, we fell into the habit of talking about how to relate to “heavy people”. However, it’s more accurate to say that “heavy” means, not something about the person, but something about our own felt response to a situation. “Heavy” is when I feel overwhelmed by a situation; when I don’t know what to do or don’t feel able to do all that seems necessary. In a Listening/Focusing Community, we try to acknowledge openly when something is feeling too “heavy” and to look for solutions rather than covering over our overwhelmed or nervous feeling.

One way we have found for dealing with heavy situations is the concept of teams (Glaser, 1972; Glaser & Gendlin, 1973). If I feel overwhelmed by a situation, perhaps if three or four other people become involved, I will feel able to be part of dealing with it.

Group members can ask for teams for themselves when they feel the need for one. On the other hand, if several group members are having a consistent “heavy”, overwhelmed feeling about relating to another group member, they can go to that person, and perhaps coming up with a solution which would involve offering to work as a team with the person.

One man asked for a team to help him over a writing block he was having. Another woman asked for a team to help her deal with the death of her sister. A group of people offered to be a team for a woman who had attempted suicide and needed someone to be with twenty-four hours a day for a while. One team kept in contact with a woman who had entered a psychiatric hospital, visiting her and helping her to return to the outside community. Another team helped a woman and her child get on welfare and find a place to live. Sometimes, a homeless person could rotate among the members of a team until a permanent home was found. Or a team could be like an AA group –available to be called whenever a person was tempted by his or her addiction.

The team concept is the glory of the self-help movement. Things that seem impossible for one person may be possible for a team. A team can keep someone out of a mental hospital or help someone out of poverty or take care of a physically sick or dying person when one person or even a family could not. The important thing to remember about teams is that each person involved can and should take on only what she feels able or wanting to do.

For instance, on the writer’s team, some people volunteered to be available for listening turns, another volunteered a massage for the weary thinker, still another was happy to type up rough drafts and to proof-read. On the team for the person whose sister had died, some people make all the phone calls and arrangements which seemed too overwhelming for the person: plane reservations, a ride to the airport, someone to look after her cats and water her plants while she was away. Another special listening friend offered to go along with her to the funeral. Still others offered listening turns for the long period of grieving that was to follow.

When no one feels overwhelmed with the burden of doing everything, all kinds of people find that they have a little bit of willing energy to do some part of the work.

## **7. Relating To Professionals**

If, even using all of the team resources at your disposal, a situation still feels too heavy for the community to handle, then it may be time to seek outside help. Some of the communities started using this manual will have had the involvement of a helping professional right from the beginning. Where this is so, that person can function as a consultant and a liaison for reaching out from the community toward other resources and agencies. However, you may have started your community without the help of a professional.

If you are going to be a community that is open to people in very heavy crisis situations, then you will want to develop long-term relationships with other helping agencies and professionals in the larger, outside community. You can work in cooperation with therapists or even psychiatric inpatient situations. You can work with ministers or with relevant helping agencies (the YMCA, Youth Service Bureaus, Senior Citizen's Centers, and Community Mental Health Center) in your area. If you contact one of these agencies, they can probably tell you how to find a listing of all such agencies in your area. You can team up with other kinds of self-help groups (AA, groups for the terminally ill, for various chronic diseases, for widows or single parents).

See Gartner & Riessman in the Suggested Readings at the end of the chapter for listings of self-help groups and contact persons in various locations. There may be several hot lines in your area (Samaritans, Child Abuse, Rape Crisis, etc) who may be able to offer you some training and may want to refer people to your group and help you to refer people to appropriate helping agencies.

It is important that your community take on what it can and wants to handle. A supportive community is a friendship network – no more, and no less. The kind of care that people give to each other mutually and feely as friends is the only service offered. As an individual, if you felt that a friend of yours was moving toward a crisis, and you felt too worried and too responsible to handle it, you would naturally call for help. A supportive community is no more than a group of friends.

It would be a mistake to begin thinking of yourselves as a “service” agency. Mental health professionals are paid to take more responsibility; they are also licensed and insured so as to be protected in terms of any legal complexities which arise in connection with mental health work. So, if a situation feels too heavy for you as friends, then by all means, hook up with a professional. Your community can still relate to the person or persons involved as friends would, while the professional will be responsible for the more anxiety-producing aspects of the situation.

When you are choosing professionals to work with, keep in mind that not all professionals are equally open to the idea of self-help. Some professionals are more committed to a disease-oriented, medical model, and to treatment through drugs and/or hospitalization, than others. It would be a good idea to explore the idea of self-help with selected professionals and to try to find out how each feels about the role of drugs and hospitalization in treatment.

You are looking for people who believe that mental disturbance is a two-way street, an interaction between the person and environment and who are willing to work with the environment as well as the person, e.g., work with family and friends. You are looking for people who believe that, yes, connection to a supportive community might help a person stay out of the hospital. You also want to find professionals who can treat you as an equal and with whom you can talk about and express feeling.

Your best guide is the way that your body feels when you are around the professional: do you feel relaxed and able to be yourself or do you feel on pins and needles and like you are being judged or observed? Does the professional ever share feelings with you? Is the professional warm and caring as any friend would have to be?

Go carefully and find one or two professionals who feel good to you and who might even want to be involved in the supportive community. These people can then lead you to other people in the various agencies who are open to the idea of self-help and who will want to be involved with your community.

Chapter Eight outlines some other groups who are committed to self-help and supportive community. It also connects you with resources for training and moves in the direction of creating a world wide network of people involved in supportive listening communities.

### **SUGGESTED READINGS**

Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. Help: A working guide to self-help groups. NY: Franklin Watts, 1980.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONNECTIONS WITH NETWORKS AND TRAINING

While the Listening/Focusing community is a specific model for building community, there are many other people working on building community. We have learned a lot from them, shared, and been supported by them. We would like to list some of the most widely known so that you can reach them for literature or a chance to attend one of their gatherings:

(a) Creative Edge Focusing [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com)

Directed by Dr. Kathy McGuire, Creative Edge Focusing™ offers coaching, classes/workshops, onsite training and consultation, and a residential weeklong Core Skills Intensive training workshop. CE Focusing Consultants are especially trained in Dr. McGuire's methods of Interpersonal Focusing, Collaborative Edge Decision Making, and Creative Edge Organization. Through the Instant "Ahah!" e-newsletter, you can receive weekly reminders to practice Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening. Through the Creative Edge e-discussion/support group, you can participate in collaborative projects, ask questions, and see demonstrations of the core skills and methods. If you haven't signed up yet, please visit [www.cefocusing.com](http://www.cefocusing.com) and do so! You can immediately download the Instant "Ahah!" Mini-Manual, with ten simple yet profound ways you can immediately incorporate Listening and Focusing into your home and work, Complete Focusing Instructions, and Dr. McGuire's extensive explanation of the incorporation of Listening and Focusing into decision making, "Collaborative Edge Decision Making."

(b) The Focusing Institute

34 East Lane, Spring Valley, N.Y. 10977. Phone: 800-799-7418

The website of the Institute [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org) has a list of certified Focusing Teachers throughout the world; a store where you can buy books and tapes by many Focusing teachers; a list of Changes groups for exchanges of Listening and Focusing, by geographic location ; a Bulletin Board for available workshops and classes and several e- discussion lists that you can join. The Focusing Institute also offers a listing of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapists, if you are looking for psychotherapy as well as self-help training.

(b) Focusing Resources [www.focusingresources.com](http://www.focusingresources.com)

2625 Alcatraz Ave. # 202  
Berkeley, CA 94705-2702

Ann Weiser Cornell, author of *The Power Of Focusing*, offers classes and workshops internationally, and, with Barbara McGavin, offers The Treasure Map

workshops for Focusing work with addictions, depression, anxiety, creative blocks, etc.

(c) Biospirituality [www.biospiritual.org](http://www.biospiritual.org)

Fathers Pete Campbell and Edwin McMahon, authors of *Biospirituality: A Focusing Way To Grow* (Loyola Press, 1985, 1997) and *Beyond The Myth of Dominance: An Alternative To A Violent Society* (McMahon, Sheed & Ward, 1993) continue their work on the interface between Focusing and our felt experience of the Sacred, presently defining a program for teaching Focusing to parents and children.

(d) Movement for a New Society [www.newsociety.com](http://www.newsociety.com)  
4722 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19143

(e) The Self- Help Reporter [www.selfhelpweb.org/research.html](http://www.selfhelpweb.org/research.html)  
C/O The National Self-Help Clearinghouse  
Graduate School and University Center/CUNY  
33 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Room 1206A  
New York, NY

While peer counseling communities are not as popular or wide-spread as in the 1970's, self-help and support groups of every kind have become increasingly Popular and serve many of the same functions, providing supportive community.

(f) Center for Non-Violent Communication [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)  
2428 Foothill Boulevard Suite E, La Crescenta, CA, 91214

Since the 1970's, Marshall Rosenberg has continued defining methods of Non-Violent Communication, how to "own" instead of "blame" in persuading others.

(g) The Re-Evaluation Co-Counseling Community <http://www.rc.org/>  
719 Second Avenue North, Seattle, Washington 98109

Although some of his beliefs do not fit with the Listening/Focusing philosophy, Harvey Jackins developed a wide-spread model for facilitating the discharge and healing of emotion in a peer counseling context.

(h) International Association Of Focusing Oriented Therapists (IAFOTS)  
[www.focusingtherapy.org](http://www.focusingtherapy.org)

Focusing Oriented Therapy (Gendlin, *Focusing-Oriented Therapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*, Guilford, 1996) includes the use of Listening and Focusing to deepen all other methods of psychotherapy by making sure that words and other symbols are connected to bodily-felt experiencing, The Creative Edge, and thus the possibility of change at the level of Paradigms.

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## APPENDIX ONE

### HANDOUTS FOR MEETING PARTICIPANTS

1. The five Shared Leadership Roles should be appointed or volunteered for at the beginning of every decision making meeting, regardless of how small and insignificant a meeting may seem. The smallest issues can blow up into big conflicts, and it is important that the roles and rules and norms be in place in case that happens!!!
2. The Handouts provide visual cues reminding everyone that the Collaborative Edge Decision Making process is in place, with its “No Interruption,” Turn-Taking, and use of Intuitive Focusing and Focused Listening to protect innovative thinking from The Creative Edge and to find The Creative Edge in interpersonal conflict .
3. They also remind and teach Role holders of their appointed tasks.
4. Xerox enough copies of the first page, “Shared Leadership At Decision Making Meetings: Summary of the Five Roles” to hand out to every group member.
5. Xerox one copy of each of the other pages, each of which describes one of the five roles. Each person who volunteers for a role receives the handout for that role.
6. You might want to laminate the Handouts for continuing use.

**Shared Leadership: Summary of Five Roles © Creative Edge Focusing, 2007,  
www.cefocusing.com**

**1. Agenda Keeper:**

- (a) Collects items for the agenda
- (b) Prioritizes items in collaboration with members and sets time limits for each
- (c) Keeps discussion on topic and moving according to time agreed, or assists in the renegotiation of time limits.

**2. Process Monitor:**

- (a) Gives attention to how members treat each other
- (b) Reminds group members not to interrupt each other and actively stops interruption if it happens
- (c) Keeps a list of members waiting for a turn to speak.
- (d) If several people start jumping in at once, (s)he stops the interruptions and starts a list of people waiting for a turn.
- (e) Reminds group members to use the Creative Edge Listening skill and the Interpersonal Focusing method to resolve conflicts and arguments.

**3. Alternate Process Monitor:**

- (a) Takes on the same tasks as the Process Monitor when (s)he becomes involved in the discussion as a participant.

**4. Time keeper:**

- (a) Notifies the group when they have a few minutes left on a topic and when the time limit for a topic has expired
- (b) Keeps a watch/clock clearly displayed
- (c) Insists that the group either renegotiate time allotment by agreement or move on to the next topic. (See also **Agenda Keeper** (c))
- (d) Gently enforces a three-minute maximum for any uninterrupted speaking turn.

**5. Recorder:**

- (a) Keeps written minutes of the meeting, recording attendance, each agenda item, important points in discussion, and the decision reached on each item.
- (b) Ensures clarity of decision on each agenda item before the group moves on.
- (c) Indicates clearly where there is no agreed-upon decision, and ask if the group wants “No decision” entered or to allot more time to make a decision.

## **ROLE 1:     **Agenda Keeper****

- (a)     Collects items for the agenda
  
- (b)     Prioritizes items in  
          collaboration with members  
          and sets time limits for each  
          item
  
- (c)     Keeps discussion on topic and  
          moving according to time  
          agreed, or assists in the  
          renegotiation of time limits.

## **ROLE 2: Process Monitor**

- (a) Gives attention to how members treat each other
- (b) Reminds group members not to interrupt each other and actively stops interruption if it happens
- (c) Keeps a list of members waiting for a turn to speak.
- (d) If several people start jumping in at once, (s)he stops the interruptions and starts a list of people waiting for a turn.
- (e) Reminds group members to use the Creative Edge Listening skill and the Interpersonal Focusing method to resolve conflicts and arguments.

## **ROLE 3: Alternate Process Monitor**

Takes on the same tasks as the Process Monitor when (s)he becomes involved in the discussion as a participant and no longer can serve as an objective monitor.

## **ROLE 4: Time Keeper**

- (a) Notifies the group when they have a few minutes left on a topic and when the time limit for a topic has expired
- (b) Keeps a watch/clock clearly displayed
- (c) Insists that the group either renegotiate time allotment by agreement or move on to the next topic. (See also **Agenda Keeper** (c))
- (d) Gently enforces a three-minute maximum for any uninterrupted speaking turn.

## **ROLE 5: Recorder**

- (a) Keeps written minutes of the meeting, recording attendance, each agenda item, important points in the discussion, and the decision reached on each agenda item.
- (b) Ensures clarity of decision of each agenda item before the meeting moves on to the next
- (c) Indicates clearly where there is no agreed-upon decision, and asks if the group wants “No decision” entered or to allot more time to make a decision.