

LISTENING AND FOCUSING IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

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In preparation for Issues in Radical Therapy, 1983.

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Biographical statement

Kathy and Zack Boukydis, each a Ph.D. in psychology, are directors of The Center for Supportive Community in Cambridge, MA. They are also in private practice as psychotherapists. Kathy is presently writing a book on the process of change in psychotherapy. Zack is working on theory and practice in the area of empathy between parents and babies.

We have been asked to describe the Changes listening community model. The model teaches two basic skills, listening and focusing, and shows how to use them for personal growth, helping others, and resolving conflicts in relationships and groups. It relies upon the mutual exchange of peer counseling turns, providing an alternative to traditional psychotherapy. The skills can be used in living, work, and political action situations. The exchange of listening/focusing turns creates an atmosphere of respect and empathy which is basic to community building. The model has been developed in interaction with reevaluation cocounseling (Jackins, 1975), Rosenberg's (1983) nonviolent communication, and the Quaker meeting format for consensus. It combines aspects of these models with the client-centered/existential work of Carl Rogers (1975) on empathic listening and Eugene Gendlin (1981) on experiential focusing.

In its simplest form, the model involves sitting down with one to ten friends, reading a manual on starting a supportive community (Boukydis, 1981), and practicing listening and focusing skills. Each person has an equal turn as the helper (listener) and the helpee (focuser). After five to ten sessions of practice, participants learn to use the skills, not only for personal growth but for conflict resolution in relationships and consensual decision-making. People who exchange listening/focusing turns

also quickly find themselves becoming bonded together into a supportive community which reaches into many aspects of their everyday living/^{and enables them to be}more politically responsive.

The personal growth skills stressed at a listening community are not a luxury but a kind of psychological literacy that should be basic equipment for every human being. One skill practiced is focusing: becoming aware of and responsible for one's own feelings and implicit bodily knowledge. Focusing is a way out of the irresponsibility that comes from blaming uncontrollable "unconscious motivations" for one's behavior. The other skill is listening: being able to set aside stereotypes and prejudices and to meet another human being through empathy. Listening is a way of bridging the gaps in understanding which lie at the base of polarized and seemingly irresolvable conflicts.

A supportive community can be helpful to an everyday person seeking personal growth and intimacy. But a supportive community is a necessity for those who are radicals, social change agents. By definition, a radical is someone who has articulated a view of reality of which the mainstream is not yet aware. The radical must maintain his or her minority vision against a constant societal pressure to see things the way other people do. Listening/focusing skills are specifically designed to help people articulate and to hold onto their own vision of reality. By constantly returning to the supportive community for nurturance and validation of his or her perspective, the radical is enabled

to go back out into the mainstream culture and continue the work of social change.

Listening is also the most valuable tool one can have on hand when wishing to change attitudes within a culture. A persuasive discussion with an everyday person about nuclear power, conservation, racism, sexism, or whatever radical cause will go more smoothly if first you attempt to hear that person out on his or her view. Then, having felt heard for perhaps the first time in his or her life, the person may be more than willing to hear your alternative position. If threat runs high again, a return to listening can defuse a potentially explosive situation. Listening/focusing skills are also essential for maintaining cohesion within social movement groups.

If you are totally convinced that pure, rational, intellectual dialogue is a possible and desirable mode for resolving world conflict and inequality, then read no further. However, if you have ever had the experience of having your feelings hurt by things said at a business meeting, of helplessly watching friends or colleagues split away because of irresolvable ideological conflict, of seeing a supposedly rational discussion turn into a highly emotional screaming match, then you are already aware that the felt level is omnipresent in human living. Through listening and focusing, you can discover that the felt level is not just a bother to be dealt with. It is a grounding of great richness for that which is truly meaningful in human living and worth working for in political action (Boukydis, 1981; Henderson, 1974, 1975).

BASIC SKILLS

Focusing

Focusing is a skill that can be used on a moment-to-moment basis in everyday living. Focusing is called upon when you awake in the morning with an uneasy, pre-verbal feeling; when you are involved in an overwhelming and confusing interaction; when you need to decide what you want or where you stand on an issue. Focusing involves stopping for a moment, setting aside your usual ways of thinking, and turning toward the implicit, preverbal knowledge carried in your body. Just as a computer can keep track of more variables and information than you could ever remember, your body is able to process more aspects of a situation that you can ever be aware of all at the same time. When a situation feels overwhelming, unclear, irrational, then it's time to check with the body's knowledge. Focusing involves asking an open-ended question ("What's going on for me?"; "What's the meaning of this for me?"; "Why am I having such a hard time with this?") and waiting for a bodily feel of the whole issue to arise. Then the focuser carefully tries to find words or an image that are just right for the feeling. When the words are just right, he or she will experience a "felt shift," a slight release of tension. Such a felt response is the body's way of letting the focuser know that the words are connected with implicit meaning, rather than being just words, mere intellectualizations.

Focusing is the center of the existentialists' demand that a person choose responsibly and act authentically in every moment. Such a philosophy lies behind much radical ideology. Yet, without focusing, a person is operating "preconsciously," without knowledge of important meanings that are functioning at a bodily level to determine behavior. The focusing skill is essential for working through the personal history of past hurts which determines present action. When combined with skills from reevaluation cocounseling, focusing helps to deepen the level of feeling and to insure that discharge (rather than the acting out of sheer emotion) is facilitated. Focusing is also essential for taking responsibility for one's part in tangled interpersonal situations and for articulating one's own stand in consensual decisionmaking.

Focusing can be practiced at home alone or in the peer counseling situation. Gendlin's Focusing (1981) and Boukydis' Building Supportive Community manual (1981) give detailed instructions for practicing focusing. The following are some basic focusing instructions. Stop for a moment and give them a try. Look for a "felt shift" at the bodily level: (a slight release of tension, the coming of a feeling, a step of change) as you find words or images for feeling:

- (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 of your thinking, and just try to find a quiet place inside.
 - (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.)
- You can continue this process for as many steps as you like, each time asking "What's this all about?" waiting for a felt sense, and then 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. Stop when you are ready.

Excerpted from Boukydis, Building Supportive Community, 1981, pp. 106-107.

Listening

It seems self-evident that the capacity to listen should be an everyday skill. Yet how often do you run into someone who can really listen? And how often, even in conflicts with loved ones, do you shout: "You don't even understand what I'm saying! Why don't you just listen?!"

Reflective listening has sometimes been taught as a superficial parroting and has lost some respect because of this. Yet, when done correctly, reflective listening remains the single most powerful way in which one human being can relate to another. The moment in which one human grasps another through empathy is one of few in which two persons can transcend the boundaries which usually isolate one from the other. Grasping another in this way is powerfully healing for both people. Yet anyone can learn to listen more deeply.

Listening is practiced in the peer counseling exchange. Most basic is client-centered reflection of feeling: the attempt to repeat or to paraphrase a person's words in a way which captures and reflects back implicit meanings and feelings as well as verbal content. The successful reflection involves taking in the other person's communication in a bodily, intuitive way and then giving it back in words or images or metaphors which allow the speaker to experience him- or herself more deeply. In a listening exchange, reflection is coupled with focusing instructions, or reminders to the speaker to stop occasionally and to get in touch with the level of bodily felt meaning. Felt meaning is the

ground for the most powerful steps in personal growth and change.

During a listening turn, the speaker is also responsible for focusing, for staying in touch with feeling in a bodily way and looking for the words which are exactly right for releasing a feeling. The following is an example of a listening/focusing turn:

Type of Response

Dialogue

Reflection Listenee: "I never feel good around other people--like I'm really lacking in self-confidence, and it really shows."
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 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."
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
Asking for More --selfish and bad. Can you say more about being *selfish*?"

- 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 not 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're ugly both inside and out."
- Focusing Invitation Listener: "Can you stop a minute and just let yourself feel that bad feeling, of trying so hard to be good and then believing that, in fact, you've been selfish and bad and ugly?"
- Listenee: (Quiet focusing, then tears) "It's so terrible to think you're all bad and rotten inside." (tears)
- Reflection Listener: (After pause) "So what's so painful is believing that you really are bad and rotten, inside and out."
- Listenee: "Yeh." (more tears)
- Positive 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." (gently touches Listenee on the knee)
- Listenee: "But then why do people say I'm ugly?" (more tears)
- Reflection 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."
- 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!"
- Reflection Listener: "So now a feeling of anger is coming--like you just didn't need that, and why are they telling you that."
- 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!"

While listening/focusing can be practiced by as few as two people exchanging turns, it's better to have at least three, so that someone can act as observer and give feedback. Most typically, listening/focusing is practiced in a small group of four to six people, each having a 10-20 minute turn. It takes about ten $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hour sessions to learn listening well enough^{so} that it will become available in less structured, everyday situations. Our manual gives detailed instructions for practicing listening. The skill learned integrates well (1983) with Rosenberg's/principles for nonviolent persuasion and with reevaluation cocounseling skills (Jackins, 1965).

Interpersonal processing

Interpersonal conflicts are an expectable component of any attempt by people to live or work in a committed fashion. Intimacy often lies only on the other side of painful recognition of difference. Anyone who attempts to build working or living relationships without a tool for resolving difference is asking for failure.

Listening/focusing skills can be used to resolve conflict, often with the use of a third person as a listening facilitator. Whenever two people have an irresolvable tension, they can sit down for the exchange of empathic listening turns on the matter. The addition of the focusing skill allows each participant to go below the level of communicating the already-known and into the deeper levels of the self that are involved in the conflict. Often, such

focusing in the presence of empathic listening leads to vulnerable sharings which immediately call forth a caring response from the other. A conflict can then be transformed into a mutual appreciation of inner needs and vulnerabilities, and a cooperative search for a mutually acceptable solution can begin.

Having a third person act as a listening facilitator can remedy the temptations toward distortion and mistrust that ^{can} make listening/focusing difficult to do in a conflict situation. The third person will be able to reflect more objectively as the speakers articulate their feelings. He or she can also receive the brunt of someone's anger in a listening way. When received empathically, anger often transforms into sharing of the vulnerable hurt beneath it. Rosenberg's (1983) skills for speaking from one's own feelings and wants instead of blaming are also essential to the interpersonal processing situation.

Listening/focusing on a long-term issue or tension calls for a good one to two hour time block, with each person getting several turns at focusing while being listened to. However, new tensions can be nipped in the bud by the automatic use of the listening response in any conflict situation, each person having a chance to be heard. In a group well-versed in listening/focusing, a group member will have little hesitation about jumping into the midst of a conflict between two others and saying, "Wait. How about if I listen

to each of you so that you can feel heard?"

Consensual decisionmaking

The idea of consensus is basic to the listening/focusing philosophy. When each person is treasured as unique and is expected to be doing his or her best at being authentically responsible for choosing and acting, it becomes impossible to rest easily with the idea of resolving conflict through a majority vote. What happens to the authentic being of the dissident? To ask him or her to merge into the decision of the group is to set up the conditions for the apathy that comes from foregoing responsible choice. Instead, in listening decisionmaking, it is assumed that each person has legitimate concerns in his or her position, and decisionmaking continues until a solution is found which fits the needs of each participant.

Although an image of consensual decisionmaking lasting long into the night strikes fear into the hearts of many participants in political action groups, the process of consensus can be tremendously satisfying and need not last long after some practice. Once a competitive win/lose approach has been given up for the assumption that each person will get what he or she needs, surprisingly creative alternatives start to arise. Absolutely essential aspects to be considered come from the mouths of the dissenting minority. The final decision is much more likely to be carried to a successful conclusion than that which would have been reached by majority vote.

The addition of listening/focusing skills to traditional consensual methods, and the possibility of felt shifts through focusing, add new possibilities for the resolution of conflict. Often, if a person can get listened to on his or her emotional investment in a particular position, something will emerge which will allow the person to see the situation from a slightly different angle. Or, as the group really hears someone's deep reasons for a particular position, someone in the group may suddenly see a new solution which encompasses everybody's needs. Having listening/focusing at a decisionmaking meeting is very like having the services of a kaleidoscope. A slight turn of the problem through listening, and a whole new way of looking arises.

Listening/focusing in consensual decisionmaking includes many specific tools which can be used at various points in the process. Leadership roles are broken down into several different tasks which are rotated among group members from week to week. Excessive power disappears as it is distributed among members. At meetings, there are an agenda keeper, a time keeper, a process monitor, and a minutes taker. The process monitor is responsible for the feeling tone of the meeting: monitoring turns, stopping interruptions, insuring that listening happens. Again, power is equalized as each person is insured an equal opportunity to speak. Group members are also responsible for insuring that a listening atmosphere is maintained.

When the going gets rough, with everyone wanting to speak at the same time and very emotionally about an issue, the group may resort to other specific techniques: a quiet moment of group focusing, often followed by a Quaker-like chance for each person to say his or her thoughts without interruption; the initiation of third-person processing between two people who are having a disagreement; a breakdown into pairs or small groups where each person can have a listening/focusing turn in order to get at the root of strong feeling. Decisionmaking continues until a solution is found which is okay with every participant in the decisionmaking process. This may involve saying, "I don't want to do it, but it's okay if others want to go ahead." Everyone in the community need not be involved in decisionmaking, but anyone who wants to can be. In a listening community, decisionmaking is set for a separate time and place, so that it doesn't swallow up the time for personal and community growth through peer counseling.

BUILDING A LISTENING COMMUNITY

As soon as two people are exchanging listening/focusing turns, a listening community exists. Often, a group grows as one friend brings another. Six to fifteen people, meeting once a week, with additional meetings by pairs and triads for listening during the week, is a typical size for a listening community. Many groups will choose to stay small and intimate. Others may be more interested in the larger, open-ended communities described in earlier articles on

Changes (Boukydis, in press; Glaser, 1972; Glaser and Gendlin, 1973a, 1973b).

Once a core group has thoroughly learned listening/focusing skills, and the non-competitive, empathic attitude that goes along with them, then the group can be opened up to the neighborhood at large. Listening skills will continue to be offered to everyone who comes, and an attempt can be made to provide a supportive context for chronic schizophrenics and others who are usually excluded from the human community. However, we have found such large communities to be a phenomena of the 1970's. 1980's people seem less likely to have the leisure time and energy needed for such open-ended helping. If you wish to start such a large community, we suggest that it takes the committed energy of six to ten experienced peer counselors to handle all of the situations and needs which may come in off of the streets. Liaison with sympathetic self-help groups and helping/ ^{agencies} is also a good idea.

Perhaps more typically of the 1980's, ^{training} listening/skills can be practiced for several weeks in a small group context and then integrated into ongoing living, work, or self-help situations. Once the skills have been mastered, their use will arise naturally in times of emotional crisis and interpersonal or group conflict. We and our friends use listening turns as a way of reestablishing a deep level of contact when we have been away from each other for a long time. Each of us also feels free to request listening times from

the other in times of personal crisis. We also use the listening structure as a way of resolving conflicts in our relationships, sometimes calling in a friend as a facilitator. Over the years, we have made some small and some large inroads in spreading the listening/focusing idea to our families and in our work places. ~~The Center for Supportive Community staff also uses the listening model of decisionmaking for Center business.~~

RESOURCES

Manual

The manual, Building Supportive Community: Mutual Self-Help Through Peer Counseling (240 pages; \$14 including postage; \$12 each for bulk orders of 10 or more) is available from the Center for Supportive Community. The manual teaches listening/focusing skills and ways of incorporating them into ongoing relationships and decisionmaking contexts. It also tells how to build a large or small community.

Summer Community Experience

The Center for Supportive Community also offers a yearly Summer Community Experience where people forming listening communit^{ies} can meet with each other and with the Center staff for further training, discussion, and sharing. The 1983 gathering will be August 27-31 outside of State College, PA. Contact the Center as soon as possible if you would like an application form.

Consultation

The Center is a collective with staff members located in State College, PA; Rochester, NY; Toronto, ONT, and Boston, MA. Staff are available for consultation or to set up a training workshop in your own location.

For further information about consultation or the Summer Experience, or to order the manual, contact us at:

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