

FOCUSING IN COMMUNITY: Introduction

Free sample excerpt of manual by Dr. Kathy McGuire, Creative Edge Focusing™, www.cefocusing.com, part of The Self-Help Package available in The Store :

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 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) 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 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.

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