Making Sense of Feelings in Meditation
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We tend to spend a lot of time either preoccupied with thinking to the exclusion of feelings or getting too immersed in and buffeted and driven by difficult emotions and thoughts. Mindful experiencing provides an alternative, coming alive in a spacious, grounded way to the implicit, embodied feel of what is happening, what Jon Kabat-Zinn has referred to as "the bloom of the present moment." This creates optimal conditions for reflecting on and making sense of feelings in order to better navigate and appreciate our lives, but, as I described in my paper (Gayner, 2019), mainstream clinical mindfulness does not specify or encourage this. In contrast, emotion-focused mindfulness therapy makes use of these optimal conditions to facilitate experiential and emotional processing. The heart of this is experiential focusing, developed by Eugene Gendlin in collaboration with Carl Rogers in the mid-twentieth century and subsequently integrated into emotion-focused therapy. Experiential focusing is a way of deepening our experiencing by coming alive to and making sense of implicit feelings and carrying forward their empowering implications into the rest of our life.

Gendlin's research indicated people who benefit from psychotherapy bring the prerequisite skills into therapy with them and the presence of these...
skills can be identified in the first session. Gendlin described and figured out how to teach these skills, which he called focusing.

In essence, focusing is not a skill or technique; instead, it is a psychological stance of inward directed attention, in which the person allows himself or herself to temporarily set aside expectations and theories about thoughts, feelings, or reasons in favour of what has been described as “waiting, of quietly remaining present with the not yet speakable, being receptive to the not formed” (Leijssen, 1990, page 228). (Elliott, Watson, Goldman & Greenberg, 2004, page 179)

I suggest if you are not familiar with experiential focusing you read my description of it below as you would read a poem -- rather than attempting to nail down exactly what focusing is, try to get a feel for what it might be about. Then click on the link below and watch some or all of Ann Weiser Cornell's great video in which she demonstrates experiential focusing in her own distinctive style. Then, if you like, come back and read my description again.

Experiential focusing involves noticing an unclear ('vague, stuck, blank, global or externally focused' (Elliott et al., 2004, page 182)) feeling and attending to that feeling rather than going up into our head to analyze it. This means dropping our theories about it along with our habitual tendencies to over-control feelings. It will likely not be clear initially what this feeling is about and we need to be able to tolerate the anxiety about not knowing where this is going. The key to focusing is bringing a gentle sensitive empathy to vague feelings that don't seem to amount to much, waiting patiently and allowing a richer implicit feeling to arise and be experienced.

We then search for an image, word or phrase, often in the form of a metaphor, that resonates in a rich, alive way with what we are feeling. We check to see if the image, word or phrase fits. If it does not, then we let it go and look for one that does. If it does fit, we look at the image or say the word or phrase silently to ourself and notice how it resonates with how we are feeling. Repeating this -- attending to the image, word or phrase and
noticing that is how we are feeling -- can bring us even more alive to how we are feeling and what our feelings are implying. This can lead to felt shifts and releases which we can explore and consolidate. In focusing, feelings tend to soften and eventually release, carrying implications about how to respond in situations. It is helpful to take time to fully receive, appreciate and consolidate a felt shift so that we can carry forward the new feeling into new therapy processes and the rest of our life.

Most people familiar with meditation and focusing emphasize the differences between them, but Gendlin himself wrote that focusing can be viewed as a kind of meditation and that other forms of meditation can benefit from integrating focusing in order to be able to make sense of vague feelings.

Gendlin... recommended integrating focusing as a form of meditation into other forms of meditation... to deepen experiencing of vague, unclear, or troubling feelings in meditation for personal development and enhancing coherence in meditation (Gendlin, 1996, pages 65–66). While Gendlin valued deeply relaxed states in meditation (ibid, page 225), he contrasted these with the role of focusing in meditation, which requires some arousal. (Gayner, 2019, page 4)

Gendlin described how experienced meditators learn to take "an elevator" down into deep calm, but that focusing takes place about half way down. In my experience, it is easy to get stuck in vague feelings in meditation by over-emphasizing calm. Gendlin recommended taking the elevator back up, "shaking off the star dust," and dropping about half way down in order
to focus on the vague feeling and allow a felt sense to form and be experienced. This means allowing some arousal into your meditation if you want to make sense of vague feelings in meditation.

Click [here](#) see Ann Weiser Cornell's wonderful fifteen-minute demonstration of experiential focusing.

To learn more about the role focusing plays in emotion-focused mindfulness meditation, read my paper (Gayner, 2019).

[focus.org](#) has a lot of useful resources, including Leijssen's (1998) paper which you can download [here](#). Worthwhile books include Elliott, Watson, Goldman and Greenberg (2004) *Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy* (Chapters 7 and 9) and Cornell’s (2013) *Focusing in Clinical Practice: The Essence of Change* which describes how to seamlessly integrate focusing into therapeutic processes with clients.

**References**


(Eds.), *Client-centered and experiential psychotherapy towards the nineties* (pp. 225–250). Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press.