

The felt sense, the body, & the brain

2020 TIFI Highlight webinar notes

the felt sense, the body, & the brain

the felt sense is a brilliant and endlessly useful concept – the genius of Gene Gendlin

focusers talk about the felt sense being in the body, but I will explain why it's in the brain as well – and how this understanding might expand our vision of what we can do with the felt sense

mind–body split or mind–body ensemble?

we experience a divide between our 'mind' and our 'body'

Gendlin says, for example:

"Our bodies know things as well as our heads. And it's just that simple. Yeah sure they do. How does your body tell you how they know something that your head doesn't yet know? Feelings right. You feel anxious, you feel nervous, you can't go to sleep at night, you're worried."

this is a poetic understanding of the felt sense which helps us learn focusing, but it risks perpetuating the separation of mind from body, a sort of reverse cartesianism where we just switch sides from the mind to the body!

neuroscience gives us a nuanced understanding of what underlies our experience of the felt sense

the real 'split' is between the two hemispheres of the brain: the right hemisphere functions as an ensemble with the body, while the left hemisphere can stand apart from the body and its distractions

the felt sense is what one half of the brain does naturally

i.e. the right hemisphere – the felt sense is the natural state of the right hemisphere and is always present in the background (except when it isn't)

most worthwhile human things probably involve the felt sense, but it can get left out without our noticing

the felt sense includes the body, but is much more than the body

why we place our attention in the body

if I ask you to direct your attention to your right hemisphere... how do you do that?

but if I ask you to direct your attention to your body... this can take you to your felt sense and into the background activity of your right hemisphere

this seminar...

I'm going to talk about:

the felt sense

our experience of it, and our understanding of it

the body

what is 'the body' that focusing people talk about?

the brain

the differences between left and right hemispheres, and why the right hemisphere is the home of the felt sense

some ideas about encouraging the felt sense in life and work

expanding our appreciation of the felt sense, given the neuroscience view from the right hemisphere

the felt sense

what do we mean by the 'felt sense'?

every workshop I teach, at whatever level, we find ourselves asking this question – this is part of the fun of teaching focusing!

thinking of it as a physical sensation is problematic, I'll explain...

Gendlin wrote...

"there are no ready-made words to describe it, and I have had to coin my own term: felt sense"
if by 'felt sense' he meant a physical sensation, he would not have needed to do this

let's remind ourselves of how he explained the term...

the distinction with feelings & emotions

"if there is already an emotion, one lets the wider felt sense form as something that can come with, under, or all around the emotion"

and these metaphorical descriptions...

"a big, round unclear feeling"

an "internal aura"

"think of it as a taste... or a great musical chord"

a fuzzy experience

"the holistic, unclear sense of the whole thing... murky, fuzzy, vague"

"the edge of awareness"

it feels meaningful

the felt sense "contains a maze of meanings, a whole texture of facets, a Persian rug of patterning"

it's about something

the felt sense is not just any bodily feeling...

the felt sense is "of a whole situation or problem or concern, or perhaps a point one wants to convey"

it's not a sense of just one thing but rather of the *whole* thing...

"a whole complexity, a multiplicity in a single sense"

it's about mind as well as body

"a felt sense is body and mind before they are split apart"

it may lead us to "think verbally, logically, or with image forms"

when we feel a shift in our body, "we sense that our usual kind of thinking has come together with body-mind"

body and mind before they are split apart = the right hemisphere, as opposed to the view from the left hemisphere where it's possible to split them

but it gets confusing!

on the one hand he says...

the felt sense "occurs bodily, as a physical, somatic sensation... in the viscera or the chest or throat, some specific place usually in the middle of the body"

while on the other...

"it is a special kind of bodily sensation... not as... tight muscles... a tickle or a pain"

instead, it's...

"a physical sense of something, of meaning"

I think this confuses people – which may not be a problem, since being confused can be part of the learning process

so focusers turn their attention to anything they feel or sense in their body – sensations, feelings, energies – and call them all a felt sense

the trick is to distinguish a meaningful sensation from one that doesn't feel meaningful

I propose: the felt sense is really...

the right hemisphere's take on the whole situation

this hemisphere has a fluid picture of what's happening around us and inside us – the whole scaboodle

problems arise because the left hemisphere tries to understand the felt sense, however...

the left hemisphere can't understand the felt sense!

in its own terms – although it inevitably tries to do so

i.e. we can't pin down the concept of 'felt sense', we can't define it so that everything becomes clear for evermore – we can only *point* at what it means

but we can *experience* the felt sense, and then reflect on our experience – this becomes an ongoing exploration of our own consciousness

it opens up many things the right hemisphere is good at: images, intuition, imagination, fresh feelings, new thinking – along with old memories, our vulnerable and wounded places, old trauma so we might say...

physical sensation is not per se a felt sense

rather, it's one possible aspect of a felt sense that comes into our awareness

i.e. sensations are often an aspect of the felt sense, and reflect strong emotional arousal, but are not themselves the felt sense – just like feelings are aspects of the felt sense

old debates in the focusing world about whether the felt sense is necessarily in the middle of the body, or whether it can be found in the periphery as well as the core, and even whether it can be experienced outside the body

the felt sense opens up both of the following...

the power of feeling to heal

our wounded and traumatised places, and...

the power of the mind to take in the world around us and respond creatively

thanks to the ability of our right hemisphere to see the whole of a situation

what is 'the body'?

it's a lot of things, all of which may feed into our felt sense...

skin

a sensory organ in its own right e.g. 'my skin crawls', I have 'goosebumps'

muscles

striated muscles attach to bones so we can move our body, smooth muscles enable bodily organs to move (although the heart has striated muscles – biology is full of exceptions to the general rule)

we feel some of our muscle tension, but we may not feel chronic muscle tension

connective tissue

fills with fluid containing stress hormones that can be drained with massage

organs

heart, lungs, gut, liver, kidneys etc.

blood

takes us all over the body

immune system

including the lymph system which follows blood vessels all over the body

autonomic nervous system

the nervous system, much of it in the body, that looks after organs and glands, and over which we don't have conscious control e.g. heart rate

peripheral nervous system

the nervous system that links the spinal cord (part of the central nervous system, along with the brain) to limbs, organs etc.

enteric nervous system

lines the wall of the gut to enable it to move so we can digest what we eat

very important for how we feel inside, but the 'second brain in the gut' doesn't write poetry or think philosophy – you need the brain in your head for that

vagus nerve

an anatomical part of the autonomic nervous system that, for example, keeps our heart and lungs in sync with facial muscles and muscles governing the voice (pharynx etc.)

qv. Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory

etc.

there's plenty more stuff in the body

viscera & internal milieu

is the scientific term for all this stuff in the body

the body talks to the brain

what's happening in all these aspects of the body is signalled to the brain via...

nervous system

neural pathways (nerve bundles) linking body and brain

sensory and motor nerves

there are more sensory nerves from body to brain than motor nerves from brain to body – because the brain's signals to change the body are simpler than all the body's signalling back to the brain of what's actually happening

blood

hormones released in the body cross the blood-brain barrier to affect the brain

hormones

e.g. stress hormones including cortisol

cytokines

big players in the immune system, currently getting airtime in the coronavirus pandemic as 'cytokine storms' are causing trouble in lungs and in brains

all of the above feeds into how we're feeling at any moment

a complex picture that is always changing

we need our human brains (the most complex known object in the entire universe, one of which sits in your head) to pull all this complexity together so we can have one feeling, one felt sense, something to attend to, an inner experience that can open up and unfold into something valuable

the brain

'carving nature at her joints'

natural things such as the brain should be seen as a whole, but to understand them better we also have to divide them into constituent parts – and the best place to do this is where nature has inserted its own joint

i.e. the anatomical divide between the hemispheres is very significant

the right hemisphere has richer connections with the viscera and internal milieu

both hemispheres are linked by zillions of nerves with the body

motor control is contralateral e.g. the left hemisphere moves the right arm and leg etc.

but sensory nerves from the viscera and internal milieu are biased towards the right hemisphere

“except in the light of lateralisation, nothing in human psychology makes any sense”

lateralisation = nature’s allocation of particular functions to either hemisphere

the statement is a re-working of: “except in the light of evolution, nothing in biology makes any sense”

the ‘right brain-body ensemble’

my own term for the way the right hemisphere and the viscera and internal milieu work together as an ensemble

we don’t experience the hemispheres distinctly, but we do, for example, notice in focusing the difference between trying to figure out why we’re feeling unhappy (left), and letting go to our felt sense of ‘unhappy’ so that it shifts in a way that surprises us (right)

the left hemisphere can’t initiate the shift, but when we let go to the right hemisphere, nature is able to run its natural course and the shift can happen

differences between the hemispheres

anatomical asymmetries

the hemispheres may look symmetrical but there are small but significant asymmetries (nature doesn’t do perfect symmetry, it does patterns and variations on patterns)

a key asymmetry is that there are more long distance pathways in the right hemisphere linking different areas than in the left, which is why the right has a reputation for being the ‘wholistic’ hemisphere

and there are more short distance pathways in the left hemisphere, making it the more ‘modular’ hemisphere, each module with a specialised function e.g. applying the rules of grammar so we can construct sentences

focused attention – open attention

Iain McGilchrist (‘The Master and his Emissary’) thinks the key difference between the hemispheres is that the left does focused attention and the right does open attention, and this arrangement has developed over the course of evolution

for example: a bird uses focused attention to peck at grain on the ground while using open attention in case there is a predator nearby

placing our attention in the body tends to create a bias to the right hemisphere – we need open attention to notice the felt sense

aside from the body – one with the body

the right hemisphere has evolved to be at one with the body (viscera and internal milieu), while the left has evolved to be able to stand aside from it so it can focus attention on whatever it’s dealing with – a brilliant arrangement!

explicit – implicit

we need our left hemisphere to make explicit what we sense implicitly with our right, as happens in focusing

the nonverbal aspects of communication, and our sense of implicit meaning, are in our right hemisphere, and we make some of this explicit with our left

routine – novelty

the left hemisphere is good at carrying out familiar tasks, while we need our right for whatever is new

foreground – background

the left hemisphere focuses attention on whatever is in the foreground

while the right maintains open attention to the background: peripheral vision, the edge of awareness, what's happening in our body

right hemisphere dominance for...

triggering emotional arousal

it's our right hemisphere that initiates emotional changes in the body when we become angry or sad, for example

triggering the stress response

our right hemisphere changes the body to be able to respond to stressful situations

triggering fight-flight reactions

the right hemisphere sets off our fight, flight and freeze reactions, whether we want to react this way or not

body mapping

all the 'bodytalk' that arrives in the brain via the nervous system and the blood is dynamically mapped in the right hemisphere so the brain knows exactly what's going on in the body

the right hemisphere is dominant for much else – but let's explore body mapping further...

body mapping in the right hemisphere

eyes, ears, limbs etc. in both hemispheres

each hemisphere maps the contralateral side of the body e.g. the left hemisphere maps the right arm and leg

viscera and internal milieu in the right hemisphere

the right hemisphere is dominant for mapping the viscera and internal milieu (it's a small difference in connectedness, but enough to tip the balance)

so only the right hemisphere has a complete map of the body

two neuroscientists who have made important contributions here...

Damasio: The Feeling of What Happens'

in his book, Damasio distinguishes (based on what happens in the brain) emotion, feeling, and the 'feeling of what happens' which he also describes as 'the feeling of a feeling' – he's onto the felt sense!

the feeling of what happens is based on dynamic body mapping, a "multi-media presentation" in the brain

NB. his discussion of the right hemisphere having the more complete body map is in a previous book 'Descartes' Error'

Bud Craig: How do you Feel?

his book is about the science of...

interoception

which is our inner sense, as distinct from our proprioceptive (the relative position of limbs) and kinaesthetic (the movement of the body in space) senses

he talks about...

the "global emotional moment"

he's onto the felt sense as well!

NB. some body maps in the brain are stable e.g. phantom limbs (where the person feels the limb that is not there because he was born with the map for it thanks to evolution and genetics), but here we're discussing body maps that are constantly in flux

the right hemisphere links inner & outer worlds, moment by moment

e.g. keeps heart rate and breathing in sync with talking and listening

the right hemisphere keeps the body in sync with what's happening around us e.g. changing heart rate to the different demands of talking and listening (if it doesn't do this well, you're in trouble, e.g. Trump)

hence...

the right hemisphere is always changing

Gendlin could be said to describe the way the right hemisphere functions, which is different from how the left hemisphere functions, hence the weirdness of 'A process model' (the left hemisphere does unit models, the right does a process model)

NB. we inevitably try to understand the right hemisphere with our left hemisphere, but this is impossible! instead, we have to experience the right hemisphere (focusing is good for this) and then do some reflective thinking (think Zen masters)

when the left hemisphere listens to the right hemisphere...

good things happen...

we're 'in touch' with our feelings and our body

we feel better even when feeling painful feelings

rational thinking

this requires both hemispheres

reflecting on intuitions

intuitions arise in the right, but we need our left to sift them and make use of them

manifesting creative impulses

creative impulses arise in the right, but they go nowhere unless the left gets involved

making the implicit explicit

the left hemisphere makes explicit (e.g. in words and sentences) what is implicit in the right – it 'unpacks' what the right hemisphere knows

when the left hemisphere inhibits the right...

corpus callosum and inhibition

the hemispheres may inhibit each other across the corpus callosum that joins them ('back off, I'm handling this') e.g. when one can do the task more efficiently than the other, or when it just gets in first

however: it suits the left hemisphere to inhibit the right more than vice versa, so it can focus on a foreground task without interference (whereas right needs left to make its implicit world explicit)

this enables avoidance and suppression (of feelings etc.), and the following...

excuses, lies, denial

these are left hemisphere functions, sometimes honed to perfection

justifying

the left hemisphere can justify anything it wants to, and it often does, however ridiculous it sounds

rationalising

i.e. making something look rational even though it clearly isn't – as opposed to rational thinking

controlling behaviours

not letting others have a say in the matter

defensiveness

defending ourselves against others' behaviour which might elicit uncomfortable feelings in our right hemisphere

the felt sense doesn't form – it's already there!

Gendlin:

“usually a felt sense must first be allowed to come; it is not already there”

however, the view from neuroscience suggests that, although it may seem to the left hemisphere that it forms (because of the time it takes to redirect our focused attention inside to our felt experience), the felt sense of the present situation *is* already present in the right hemisphere

Gendlin also says:

“even in simple conversation... one can stop and sense the place that one is trying to ‘get at’, the place that one is speaking from”

I think this fits with the neuroscience perspective!

except when it isn't already there...

we often get into autonomic states where the felt sense isn't present – and where it doesn't come until our state changes

when the felt sense is not already there...

Stephen Porges and polyvagal theory

Porges's polyvagal theory attracts a lot of attention because it describes the different autonomic states we can be in when relating and communicating with others (they should give him a Nobel prize)

the states where the felt sense isn't present arise...

when we're outside our 'window of tolerance':

in either...

hyper-arousal – polyvagal danger

i.e. fight-flight reactions when we're very emotionally aroused – overwhelmed, or (in focusing language) 'too close'

or...

very low arousal – polyvagal life threat

i.e. when we have too little emotional arousal – cut off, 'too distant', or dissociated

the felt sense is already there when we're within our window of tolerance, in polyvagal safety

i.e. when we have 'optimal' emotional arousal and we feel safe (we needn't be conscious of this), the felt sense is available in our right hemisphere

organising the world around the felt sense...

if the felt sense is the natural function of the right hemisphere, perhaps we can lean on it more often...

beyond the practice of focusing

in the midst of living and working

beyond people who have learnt focusing

focusers don't own the felt sense!

beyond therapy and self-help

engaging with the felt sense often starts here, but it doesn't have to end with these very 'inner' activities

we could take it further...

into:

how we work together

the felt sense in groups and organisations

how we approach the big problems

e.g. the really big one – climate change

personally, I find my felt sense endlessly helpful, including in challenging situations – for example, when I go sailing (being in charge of a 40 foot boat on the open sea), I turn to my felt sense not only to know how I'm feeling (all OK, tired, anxious etc.) but also to notice changes in the wind, in the water patterns, what the sails are doing, how my companions are – and to decide how to respond

the felt sense beyond the practice of focusing...

for example...

thinking at the edge – TAE

a process for creative and original thinking

pausing: the 'revolutionary pause', the 'natural pause'

focusers are taking this simple practice into all sorts of places

"the pause as an embodied shift from mindless to mindful" (Serge Prengel) – we can take this anywhere!

trusting our felt sense

we can work on this for the rest of our lives, whatever we are involved in

trusting others' felt senses

other people can be supported in including their felt sense in whatever we are doing with them

the right hemisphere world

it's not all la-la land – we can't do very much there without encountering...

our vulnerability

all our personal emotional vulnerabilities that we encounter in focusing and that our left hemisphere may be skilled at avoiding

uncertainty, not knowing

the left hemisphere wants certainty, while the right is relaxed about uncertainty and not knowing the answer, the solution etc.

paradoxes: where opposites are both true

the left hemisphere wants one thing to be true, while the right quite likes paradoxes

making mistakes, getting it wrong

we can't get it right all the time, and the felt sense doesn't give us the perfect way forward every time

but we can aim to put right what we got wrong, and learn something in the process

self and other

the left hemisphere looks after our persona (the person we want others to see) and puts other people into fixed positions

the right hemisphere looks after the reality of our relationships – the fluid implicit ground where we can find our sense of self, of other, and of 'we'

complexity

the left hemisphere likes to make everything simple, the right can handle complexity (which may be closer to reality)

leaning on the right hemisphere...

openness to changing my mind

however painful this is – and being ready to hold my ground when I need to

not seeking solutions (immediately)

it's my left hemisphere that demands a solution – good solutions arise if we allow ourselves time to reflect

moving slowly, allowing things to unfold

instead of Mark Zuckerberg's 'move fast and break things' (sign of a rampant left hemisphere?)

sometimes we have to act quickly, and then "slowly" may mean a brief pause

making a space for something to come

e.g. a blank sheet of paper with a topic or a question written on it, or the time-space for a group to pause in its deliberation

don't fill the space straight away

e.g. when my artist client started at art school, he was told to go to his canvas and paint something, instead of being taught how to paint first

catching ideas when they arise

e.g. with a notebook you carry around – lest they vanish like dreams

doing the edgier, more difficult thing

leave your familiar comfort zone run by your left hemisphere, and make yourself turn to your right hemisphere to do something new

the 'felt sense zone'

i.e. the space and atmosphere in a group that encourages group members to consult their felt sense and put it to work

some ideas from a long list I have and keep adding to...

building a good atmosphere

to support polyvagal safety and social engagement, stopping fight-flight reactions from taking off

e.g. the play 'Oslo' about the Palestine/Israel peace negotiations showed how useful a supply of jokes was for the mediators

look out for shaming others and allowing others to shame you – often subtle, always damaging

listening to others' views

we focusers know we need to listen to each other – and really listen i.e. take in what others are saying so we have a felt sense of their viewpoint, not just an instant like/dislike reaction

making a space for disagreements

let disagreements become fuel for going more deeply into a topic, rather than a pathway to derail progress

information needed: write things down so others can ponder them

the felt sense in focusing practice leans towards inner information – memories, personal things etc., but when we work together in groups we also need information, an informed felt sense (enough information, not too much)

if you want to get your viewpoint across, taking the trouble to write something about it and circulate this allows everyone to have a felt sense about it

say why you hold your view

instead of battling over what you think is 'right', state why doing X is the best thing to do, then others can think about it before responding

there's no such thing as a group felt sense

by definition! the felt sense is personal and in the moment, prone to changing

if you believe in group felt senses, are you sure you're not talking about group feelings? emotions are contagious, and it can feel nice to all agree on something and unite around it

the idea of a group felt sense can make it harder for dissenting views to be expressed (Gendlin said that when people spoke this way, he would leave and go to the bathroom)

the felt sense and computer screens

beware!

laptops and smartphones keep demanding our left hemisphere focused attention

what happens to our right hemisphere open attention? do we notice what's happening around us? if we don't we may not realise that we don't...

we are becoming increasingly accustomed to living in a world run by computer systems, as if this were perfectly natural and normal – it isn't, they may be useful at times, but they need to be treated with discernment – which requires our felt sense...

conclusion

the felt sense is a big cushion as well as a bottomless well

the felt sense can absorb a lot – feelings, knowledge

it can act as a buffer (“this guy's over the top but I'm not going to react”), and it can adapt and, of course, if we trust it, it comes up with something, a way forward...

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