

The Felt Sense Need Not Always Be Physically Felt

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The first thing I teach people about Focusing is to find the physically felt quality of something in the middle of their bodies. I'm sure many other Focusing teachers start in the same way. The felt sense is the key to Focusing, and it shows up as a slight physical sense in the body. Many processes can be opened up or started if we search inside for the feel-quality of a situation – “how does this whole thing feel inside just now?” Typically, we get something like a ‘heavy’ or a ‘tight’ quality, or perhaps an ‘expansive’ or ‘flowing’ if the feeling is positive.

Yet often in Focusing we explore felt senses without finding a particular feel-quality, and that does not stop them from opening up. Many times it feels like an unnecessary distraction from the process to ask for what is physically felt, because the process is happening anyway.

Many creative human activities work perfectly well without the individual identifying a physically felt quality. For example, poets do not need to find this in order to write poetry – we would not demand that they follow the Focusing steps! Yet good poetry, I believe, comes from the felt sense, a body-centred process of unfoldment. A ‘something’ on the edge of the poet’s awareness is pursued until the poem is manifested onto paper and is complete.

In what other ways than the physical can we explore a felt sense? We can look for a symbol or handle that occupies our attention as we explore – an image, some words, a gesture or a sound. Sometimes this implies a physically felt quality, such as “it’s like having a big lump of lead inside” – we all know what *that* feels like! We can ask what emotional feelings are around, and allow any waves of emotion, whether subtle or intense, to flow through us. Or we may explore the life details, as when memories arise spontaneously from within, or when we ask “what is this all about in my life right now?”

Finding the physically felt quality of a problem is particularly useful when these other avenues are not working and we feel stuck. Many feelings and processes become unstuck if we simply find how they are affecting us physically right now. And starting a Focusing process with a physical felt sense of the topic helps to deepen one’s body-centred connection with it.

The bodily-felt quality is therefore one of a number of ways to explore inside, but it is not the *sine qua non* of Focusing. If it feels like this is Focusing but you don’t have a physical referent, it doesn’t matter. The focuser can tell whether the process is body-centred and ‘real’ or not, and the listener or guide can look out for signs of body-centredness. These include: the eyes looking downwards, pauses in the talking to check back inside, and that characteristic ‘feel’ that the focuser is connected to something inside and is not just wandering around in his or her head or outside the body. Such a ‘feel’ is a felt sense itself, of course.

Focusers can focus, poets can write poetry, composers can compose music, and business people can make good decisions, without always referring to a physical sense. If they were to look for one, they might find something, but does that help if the process is working anyway? They might also have difficulty finding a felt sense. If there is little emotional content to what is happening, its physical aspect can be faint and hard to find. At these times a simple inner ‘knowing’, a ‘feeling of rightness’, is probably sufficient.

On the other hand, when things get stuck, finding the felt quality can open them up again. Gene Gendlin gives the example of the poet who can’t find the last line of the poem, yet who can find the felt sense of that line in the body. So with any other Focusing process. When other avenues are blocked or empty, the physical feel can lead us back to our centre, to the place inside from which we can set off on the next part of the journey. Knowing to do this is one of the advantages of knowing Focusing.

I want to finish with questions. Is the physical intensity of the felt sense an indicator of its emotional intensity? Do people with easy access to their emotions feel their felt senses more physically than those who are distant from their emotions? I would like to hear views about this.

Peter Afford, November '93