

The felt sense, the right brain, and other people

notes of presentation at Cambridge conference, July 2016

why are we talking neuroscience here? focusing is based in philosophy!

Personally, I feel more at home with science than with philosophy. And neuroscience gives us another perspective on Focusing that adds to those of philosophy and of our personal experience.

I think neuroscience has interesting things to say about Focusing and the felt sense, and the nature of the mind–body connection. And my experience of Focusing over many years helps me to make sense of neuroscience.

what *is* a felt sense?

The concept of the felt sense is the key to Focusing. We have Gendlin to thank for pointing out the need to distinguish this aspect of our felt experience from feelings and emotions. At the same time, I think what he says about the felt sense can confuse people: is it a physical sensation or not?

In some places, Gendlin describes a felt sense as a sensation in a specific place, usually in the middle of the body, but a special kind of bodily sensation that is unlike, for example, a tight muscle. In other places, he describes it as an internal aura, a taste or a “big round unclear feeling” – these sound less like physical sensations.

Surely people new to Focusing can be forgiven for feeling confused! It’s all part of the mystery, usually rewarding, of learning Focusing. But if someone then spends their time focusing on physical sensations, no one need be surprised.

On top of this, everyone is different in that some of us experience felt senses less physically than others. This may reflect differing levels of emotional arousal, and of course we can feel something without necessarily experiencing big changes in the body.

If felt senses were just physical sensations, someone else would have noticed the value of taking heed of them a long time before Gendlin did! He also says they are meaningful, they are about some situation, they unfold step by step, and they carry the feeling that there is something more to come from them.

So a felt sense need not be a physical sensation as such, but it helps to have our awareness in the body for it to come to our attention. Neuroscience can help us to sort out this confusion.

the felt sense is a right brain phenomenon

While the left hemisphere maps the right arm and leg, and the right maps the left, the insides of the body (heart, lungs etc.) are mapped mainly in the right. So if you want to know what is happening *in* your body, you need your right brain.

The changes that happen in the body as our moods and emotions ebb and flow affect the right brain more than the left. A basic task of the right brain is to keep our inner state aligned with what is happening around us – adjusting heart rate and breathing, for example.

The right brain forms an ensemble with the body – a ‘right brain–body ensemble’ – whereas the left hemisphere sits one step apart from the body. This arrangement allows us to get on with whatever we are doing (left) without having to worry about what is happening in our innards (right) all the time.

The left hemisphere focuses attention on whatever is foreground, while the right maintains a more open attention to our environment and inner bodily state.

The felt sense is based on the right brain’s constellation of firing in–the–moment that models our inner bodily state. We can’t just put our attention into our right brain, so we put it into the middle of the body, and get to the right brain that way.

The various areas of the right hemisphere are more inter–connected with each other than are those of the left, which is more modular in its layout. This inter–connectedness in the right may underlie the tendency for one thing to lead to another thing in Focusing, e.g. a felt sense leads to an image which leads to a fresh realisation about something.

The left hemisphere is generally dominant for language – so the felt sense in the right often lacks words at first. As left focuses attention on the felt sense, words start to come and we get a handle on our inner experience.

When we feel disconnected from ourselves, we may use our left hemisphere to try to figure out why.

But only our right can re-connect us with ourselves – it's already connected with the body as an ensemble. Focusing allows the right hemisphere to do its thing with less interference from the left, which makes focusing a natural process that can lead to emotional healing.

The felt sense (right) is more intricate, has more to it, than what we can say (left). The life of the right brain-body ensemble always includes more than we can say because it puts each moment of living together in a continual process.

Gendlin's philosophy is a brilliant intuitive insight into how the right brain works.

Focusing requires both sides of your brain!

Because the right hemisphere is already integrated with the body, the key to Focusing is for the left to connect with it. Then left, right and body are all linked together.

Left is liable to dis-connect from right because it can inhibit signals from the right more effectively than vice versa. Left's inhibition of right can become habitual, and then we need a practice like Focusing to overcome it. We learn to switch left's usual focused attention on something in the outer world to whatever is unfolding in right's more open attention as it keeps body and environment aligned. When words come in Focusing, both sides of the brain work together.

Gendlin says felt senses are not just there, they must be given time to form – but this is a left hemisphere perspective. The right hemisphere's mapping of the body is always there, and what takes time is for the left to re-orient its attention towards it. The felt sense is already there, but to bring it to awareness requires both hemispheres and takes a few moments.

Focusing tends to lead to surprises because the right hemisphere works in a different way from the left (more as a whole instead of modular chunks), and we all have a left-biased perspective – conscious mind, language-based, focused attention.

Arguably, the reason for attending to the body in Focusing is not because what happens there is so important but because by attending to it we anchor ourselves in our right hemispheres. Which is where interesting stuff emerges – images, creative impulses, insights, healing and so forth.

the contrasting contributions the left and right hemispheres make to our experience

Re-presenting and presence. Right is simply 'present' to what is happening inside and outside, so this is where we find our sense of bodily presence. Left 're-presents' what arises when we are 'in presence', in words and concepts. Problems start when we value the representations (which we like when we first make them) more than remaining in the present (which may require fresh representations in the next moment).

Persona and 'real self.' Left is the basis of our self-image – who we think we are and the person we want others to see. Right is rooted in our actual bodily experience and our sense of who we really are – which we may avoid because it includes unwanted feelings. Our conscious self-image may be congruent with our bodily sense of self, or not.

Self and other. Left is concerned with me, my ego, what I want from the world and from other people, while right takes in the other person without my noticing and tweaks my bodily and emotional state in response. To have both self-awareness and an empathic sense of the other, both hemispheres are needed. If left inhibits right, I may lack self-awareness and empathy.

the right brain is interested in other people as well as in the body

A fundamental role of the right hemisphere is to keep the inner state of the body in sync with what is happening in the outer world and the other people who populate it. For example, our heart rate and breathing change during conversation depending on whether we are speaking or listening. We take this for granted, but if inner and outer are not in sync we are in trouble – our communicating and relating will lead to problems.

Just as the felt sense is *about* some situation out there in the world, so our inner state that underlies our felt experience has a lot to do with what is happening in our relationships.

The right hemisphere is biased for the following aspects of relating:

- *resonance:* automatic bodily and emotional reactions to others, such as getting sleepy when listening to someone talking without feeling
- *attunement:* our capacity to adjust how we are so as to match the other person, such as how we take turns to speak and listen

- *theory of mind*: our ability to model the other person's mind that may see things differently from how we do
- *empathy*: is what emerges when we have the above three – it's a more conscious experience and we can act upon it
- *non-verbal communication*: while the left hemisphere does most of the talking, the right does the nonverbal stuff – posture, gesture, eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice

Most of these aspects of relating require our having a sense of self and a sense of other, and the ability to distinguish them – which we are able to do because they affect our body differently.

how the left brain deals with other people

The left hemisphere reaches out to others, engages with them, and enjoys social contact. It may prefer to do this to looking inside and focusing. It wants something from the other person, and if this is mutually enjoyable social engagement, then all is well.

But it can also get competitive. It may inhibit the right hemisphere and make the other person into an object – a fixed concept of who they are – rather than relate to them as a person. It can be prone to wanting to manipulate and control others, and to getting angry with them. Without the right hemisphere's input, it objectifies itself as well as the other person, rather than allowing itself to be the fluid mouthpiece of a whole self.

so: the felt sense should connect us with other people as well as with ourselves!

Given the generally inter-connected nature of the right brain, and the sensitivity to self and other that is based there, we might expect that exploring felt senses would bring this sensitivity more into awareness. Whilst we talk a lot about the inner relationship in Focusing, might the practice not have as much to do with our relationships with others?

Dan Siegel says that the improved ability to attune to oneself from practicing mindfulness also leads to better attunement and empathy with others. Is the same true for Focusing?

Most people find it easier to focus with a listener than on their own, so this may reflect my point here about other people. But a hallmark of the Focusing-listening exchange is that the focuser shuts the listener down to some extent, by closing the eyes and insisting that they listen and respond only in certain ways. Perhaps what we are doing is setting up the exchange to help the listener embody right hemisphere attunement and to limit their capacity to engage the focuser's left hemisphere.

I suspect that many of us are drawn to Focusing in part because of attachment difficulties early in life – I certainly was. It offers a way to allow another person close to our inner world of feeling in a way that we can control, so that we do not lose our sense of interpersonal safety. Having made progress in resolving such childhood difficulties, the challenge for us is surely to use our felt senses more while engaged with others – so that we do not offer ourselves as listeners *only* within the controlled arrangements of our Focusing practice.

In normal social interaction, a lot can happen in the body, but our attention is generally focused on the other person. Maybe we can learn to include our felt senses more as we talk with others, being aware of the broader sense of our interaction as well as our emotional feelings. This means trusting our felt senses during conversations, including when we do not sense them as physical sensations.

In real life, we need to listen to others as well as to ourselves, and doing so can trigger strong feelings! We must express our feelings, but we can also return to our felt sense of the whole situation, which embraces our different views, and speak from there. We need to allow words to come that enable differences to be honoured without undue offence being given.

We certainly need our felt sense to *distinguish* ourselves from others, to know which feeling belongs to whom.

I propose that we think of the felt sense as being not just about me, but as pointing to a wider sense of self and sense of other, all wrapped up into one felt experience. Perhaps this reflects our actual experience, but it may not always tally with our idea of what 'felt sense' means – that is prone to becoming overly tied to physical sensation.

Peter Afford, December 2016

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