

First published in 2014  
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
73 Collier Street  
London N1 9BE, UK  
and  
400 Market Street, Suite 400  
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

*www.jkp.com*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Emerging practice in focusing-oriented psychotherapy : innovative theory and applications / edited by

Greg Madison ; foreword by Mary Hendricks-Gendlin.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84905-371-6

1. Focused expressive psychotherapy. 2. Solution-focused brief therapy. 3. Mind and body therapies.

I. Madison, Greg, editor of compilation.

RC489.F62E54 2014

616.89'147--dc23

2013047023

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84905 371 6

eISBN 978 0 85700 722 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain

## CHAPTER 5

## Dwelling in the Process of Embodied Awareness

### Letting Fresh Life Come Through Wholebody Focusing Therapy

*Astrid Schillings*

In Wholebody Focusing-Oriented Therapy (WBFOT) we work directly with the human condition of *being* life as well as *having* life—this is what Gendlin points to philosophically in his expanded understanding of the body. In this chapter I explore how Wholebody Focusing (WBF) has shifted my way of being with clients in therapy and which WBF basics and Focusing fundamentals I find especially fruitful in psychotherapy and everyday living. This dynamic interface of Focusing and WBF is the theme of this chapter.

#### Is “Wholebody Focusing” Focusing?

Most of Eugene Gendlin’s descriptions of Focusing are also true for what we now call WBF. In his philosophy of the implicit, he outlines those processes that are explicitly worked with in WBF. Gendlin writes, “The sense of and access to existence is the life of the body as felt from inside, ‘your sense of being your living body just now’” (1973, p.232).

In *Focusing* (1978) Gendlin uses the word “body” to mean much more than the physical machine. “Not only do you physically live the circumstances around you... Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people—in fact, the whole universe. This sense

of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside" (p.75).

Gendlin says that we actually *are* the body-environment-interaction. WBF engages with this interaction explicitly, and that makes it more available to the Focusing process on different levels. It seems to touch something vital in people, as I have heard this explicit kind of inviting of the environment and grounding included in many Focusing attunements of the more "classical" kind over the last few years.

Most of Gendlin's writing explicates how holding the felt sense as the edge of awareness can differentiate the whole complexity of the sense of our bodily lived situations and thereby bring change. He describes the character of change as a gradual step-by-step process of carrying forward or in other cases a dramatic "big shift" change. "Eventually a big step comes, a big shift in how one's *whole body* feels the problem" (Gendlin 1993, p.28).

There is a specific quality of directness and immediacy opening in the dynamics of WBF awareness that radically invites a "self-propelled feeling process" (Gendlin 1964, p.14), where experiencing is "ahead of his (the focuser's) concepts" (ibid). This "ahead of concepts" may take a long time in the WBF process and several body shifts may need to occur before symbolization on the verbal/conceptual level sets in.

### Why Wholebody Focusing?

Central to the development of WBF is the work of Kevin McEvenue, Focusing trainer and Alexander Technique teacher, who has brought together the two disciplines in his work for the past 30 years. Both approaches are predicated on an inner directed way of bodily living invited by specific qualities of awareness and attitudes of not-doing. In conversation, McEvenue shared that one of his clients once exclaimed in a session, when experiencing a shift, "Oh, this is Wholebody Focusing." So the new term was born from experiencing, not from a conceptual frame of reference.

My shift into WBF was gradual and from different paths, though I would not have named it that way at the time. It came with me beginning to wonder what life is about and why we are here. In this spirit I started Focusing during my person-centered clinical

psychology education. I also continued my practice in meditative inquiry and training on the interfaces of sensitive body awareness (Feldenkrais 1981; Levine 1997; Ludwig 2002) and inner-directed authentic movement, Qigong and mindfulness. I sensed a truth in each of these paths in looking for an unconditional way of being, yet I was amazed at how some of the teachings and rationales seemed not only to be in conflict with each other, but also to claim exclusive rights to the truth. Each of these different paths brought a precise change in how I felt alive and in how I carried forward the other practice respectively. Missing one of them would have meant missing a vital part of me.

The conflict dropped away in two waves: first, when actually engaging in Gendlin's philosophy, in his rigorous phenomenological investigation of experiencing; and second, when I took my first WBF workshop. Thanks to this workshop, my previous understandings fell into place—not as an eclectic mix but as "implicit crossings." These paths live further now, implicit in my daily living body and in my work as a WBF therapist.

### The Wholebody process in Focusing and in Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT)

#### Case example: Lisa

*A 40-year-old woman, Lisa, had suffered from a vascular disease since early childhood and was living with chronic pain. Without medication it is a life-threatening disease. Her whole body, especially her joints, kept aching. This is our first session.*

I sensed her exhaustion as she came into my office. I usually let people choose where to sit, and I offered some water. And as we shared the space of the room and the drinking of water, I sensed her body orienting. She started narrating all the physical therapies as well as the psychotherapies she had tried. I let her know that I sensed her strain, her sheer strain, just to be alive. She silently cried, with her body releasing, her breath deepening. With her nodding came: "Yes, and I am not supposed to show it." I invited her to give that realization space and, silently, I gave

myself space for it too. As therapist, I sat, allowing myself not to know how to be with her in that straining to live.

She voiced her fear of being told again that her suffering from this disease pointed to emotional suppression. As I sensed the ground, the room, the light and air, listening into my living with her, what came to me was a sense of just being company to her in that straining. And from there, words came spontaneously in me: "A very young child suppressing emotion and developing this disease? I wonder how?" Our eyes met and she and I knew, in that moment, that we were going to work together.

"As a child I wanted to walk and stand like other children and I found it so painful, I gave up." She needed that place in her to be heard, the place where she had wanted to stand on her own two feet and walk like other children. When the session was completed, she walked in her very slow, complicated arrhythmic way to the door of my office. I walked slowly beside her, the way my body walks, and keeping her walking company as well. She said she felt a rightness in the work. I could sense how the literal physical walking with her, this short piece of living together body to body, let her symbolize the sense of "rightness." It resonated with what I too sensed walking beside her.

In the next session I invited her to stay with a spontaneous rubbing movement of her hands. It was as if she wanted to rub off this sense of "thick glue" inside her veins. When I encouraged her to stay with it, she sensed that the "thick glue" was "so much sadness." And it just wanted to be there. And then the memory came, of being told not to be so sad. "But it was sad." And as we stayed with the sadness, slowly her arms started stretching and moving and she sensed the "glue-sadness" slipping down her shoulder blades. In stretching and slowly moving her arms and fingers, her neck also came alive, and she breathed more deeply. She could experience clearly how allowing the movement let the glue-like sadness of the situation that the child had experienced slowly slip down, giving way to an expanded sense of stretching and living and connecting with more and more of her body.

What mattered to her at this stage was that she could sense the feeling process that was going on and allow it to be there (with me actively supporting her by resonating back and thus

co-holding the space of awareness to let her fresh life come). She experienced again and again how alive she felt in allowing that process, even though the chronic pain was still there. She wanted "the rawness" of what she experienced, with nobody talking her out of it. Listening into her gestures and movements, allowing them to find their way she felt again a "rightness" and "as if for the first time I belong to myself." Her concept of herself as being only stiff, complicated, heavy, slow and in pain shifted into feeling this tingling aliveness as well as the pain. She kept moving her arms in expanded movements.

As therapist I learn not to be attached to concrete invitations of how the wisdom of the body might find a way of transforming the pain by encouraging her to reconnect to some greater body context, though I have often experienced this as helpful. Instead I was humbled into the moment-to-moment co-allowing of the client's process slowly unfolding her body wisdom, a process that is not necessarily connected to her having no pain (much as I had wished that for her). So *her* occurring in the moment had to move into *her* implying—*her* wisdom of *her* body in now feeling so alive, so tingling all over with inner-directed movement, while also now experiencing the aliveness in the "paining and the straining."

In those moments the shifting (of the concept) of suffering could be experienced as just being alive in it all. She had a vast felt sense of sheer aliveness, which her logical critical voices would question straightaway. So I supported her in actively holding the space of awareness in that aliveness and the movement, so it could be lived and felt and known *by* her whole body. In a later session she explained that, in all the treatments she was given, she had been ignored as a person. It was all about the pain and the sickness, not about how it was for her.

This client could access inner-directed movement spontaneously. I encouraged this by acknowledging and then holding in awareness the delicate beginnings of gestures and how to listen into them. From there, Lisa could allow more expansive movements to come. For this client, explicit explorations of "grounding into being here" came from trusting her inner-directed movement first and then slowly moving into

sensing her body-environment connection. I refer to this in more detail later.

### Basics and fundamentals of ongoing process

The two terms “basics” and “fundamentals” of ongoing process should not be sharply separated as they naturally overlap in places. They are pointers for understanding the process which I find useful. The WBF “basics” explicate the specific impulses that are instrumental to the WBF process and how the more classical Focusing process is expanded. The “fundamentals” point to Focusing as we “classically” know it. In the context of this chapter I only mention them briefly in their relevance to WBFOT. This is still a work in progress and will be published soon.

When WBF basics interact with “classical” Focusing fundamentals an expansion and immediacy emerge that carry the living process forward in radically direct ways right from its source. We access living itself, with implications for the interactional/relational space between client and therapist. As you can see from the above example, I bring in the WBF basics whenever I sense them potentially implied in the ongoing therapeutic situation and to help expand what is available. WBFOT impulses are not meant to come “between” client and therapist like instructions of how to be or how not to be. Any intervention that crowds in on the open relational/interactional space, on the dynamics of their “inter-living,” undermines the authority of the experiential change process of therapy. The therapy process needs to be grounded in the interaction first.

### Wholebody Focusing basics

#### 1. *Grounding into being here (Dasein)*

For the philosopher Martin Heidegger, “being here” is a human (kind of) being-in-the world and being-with-others: *Dasein*. “Dasein” is an ordinary German word meaning something like human existence or the human condition. Gendlin explicitly includes the body in *Dasein* (1993, p.32). He also speaks of the body as “a palpable presence underneath, the felt sense, *Befindlichkeit*, a finding oneself” (ibid).

The first of the WBF basics is “grounding into being here.” It is a pausing of (our) being busy with things, with (our) problems, which can manifest often quite physically in tense shoulders, shallow breathing or even the holding of a trauma pattern. Gendlin prefigures the notion of “clearing space” in 1978: “To take such a break is to align the body again to its original source. One takes it out of being the problem... the body eases and feels expansive. How did the body come in the first place? The individual person was not in charge of that. Similarly I can ease my controls in living, at least temporarily, to let my body re-establish its natural belongingness in the wider scheme of forces in which it is made and maintained” (Gendlin 1978, p.345). Both the “clearing space” in Focusing and “grounding into being here” as the first of the basics in WBF are developed from the same intention: they offer concrete explorations to support people into the process of experiencing.

WBF works with exploring bodily sub-processes while standing or sitting and letting the felt sense of all of me “being here” come as a direct grounding in all the ongoing interactions that we are, as a whole. From this place we get sense how the ground feels now, how gravity interacts with the body, how breathing goes on, how the body senses the room and the environment, including the therapist as part of this environment, maybe hearing the sound of a bird, a plane or a car.

When the sub-systems in the body are experienced as being interconnected, it can bring a feeling of lightness and flow. Also a surprise may come, in discovering that no part of the body can move without affecting every other part. It is a holding in awareness of these body-constituting interactions. Our living body simply *knows* how to interact with light, earth and the environment. It is at that level, where Gendlin says we have “plant bodies” (Gendlin 1993, p.34). It is there, in the deep ground of the body-environment process, that we *are* the environment, the universe. The five senses, our behavior, perception and symbolization, are elaborations of that process. We can rely on something working in this deep ground of body-environment interaction, simply because we are alive.

As humans we not only *are* the living body-environment process, but we can also experience it as a felt sense, have it as a conscious knowing. The felt sense itself is our living before the body and

mind split. So “grounding into being here” in Wholebody Focusing is a grounding into “interaction first” in an expanded, physically felt way.

### Case examples: a larger grounding

A client, a mother of two young children, often feels helpless with her husband suffering from a fatal illness. In one session I invite the client to stand on her own two feet and explore her “grounding into being here.” She is allowing herself to become aware of the ways she is “held by the bigger reality.” She feels puzzled, as this felt sense does not make logical sense in terms of the situation with her husband dying. Suddenly she feels that she is not disappearing any more into overwhelm, but is in touch with what she calls a “deep delicate solidity.” This helps her to sense her own way of holding and being held in the situation now, which brings a shift from feeling overwhelmed by helplessness to more of a sense of “being with” her husband dying.

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Another client finds it hard to feel her body on the ground at all. So I accompany her into just acknowledging her tension and shallow breathing, which brings some space and from there she finds her arm can rest on the chair and feel warm inside. She gets a sense of some kind of “bigger” interaction working.

When thoughts come, or issues start crowding the experience, the client is supported into acknowledging what is there or clearing space to continue “grounding into being here” for a while. A feeling of more expansion in relation to issues often emerges in the client: an expansion of awareness, which creates a sense of expanded inner space and more bodily lived ground: *Dasein*.

## 2. Allowing inner-directed movement

Together with “being here,” the “allowing of inner-directed movement” is a foundation of WBF. Gendlin observed: “Life is being interaction and at the same time a living from itself, a living forward from itself. In other words every organism is a self-organized

process in exchange/interaction with the environment” (personal communication, May 2012).<sup>1</sup>

When “grounding into being here” happens, most people notice the body starting to go into natural movements of its own making. In WBF especially, two kinds of inner-directed movement are relevant: first the organismic self-regulation of unwinding the stress-responses into stretching, yawning, swaying and righting reactions or the discharging in trembling and shaking after shock. When we allow more of this inner-directed living, we can sense when the body needs pausing or can self-regulate our phases of work. The body knows how to walk or to sit at the dinner table, to orient itself in space. We would not be able *consciously* to decide to engage in all these complex sub-processes. Within the context of this chapter I cannot address the profound implications for stress management and the prevention of burnout and dis-ease more explicitly.

The second kind of inner-directed movement comes as the bodily edge of awareness, a fresh, conscious knowing. After the self-regulating movement there may be a time of sensing of what wants your attention now or what theme you want to work on. Something small yet unclear may emerge. Standing makes a sensing of physical interconnectedness, of orienting in space, and the spontaneous coming of movements is more readily available.

Back to the first WBFOT example with Lisa: the felt sense of more aliveness first manifested in the rubbing movements of her hands, and it was only when she acknowledged the sense of “thick-glove sadness” with all the memories opening that the fresh sense of aliveness came in the inner-directed expansive movements and stretching. The expansive movement and the felt sense of aliveness are one movement. By being and holding the whole experience in awareness it becomes more. First, the movement is the felt sense of aliveness, and then it also becomes a symbolization by being held in sustained awareness. By experiencing and symbolizing this aliveness in movement, the client experiences several bodily shifts.

These shifts in experiencing and symbolization manifest spontaneously in the expanding movement. They are very precise:

<sup>1</sup> Gendlin uses odd grammar to point to the primacy of an organism as interaction with its environment as well as living from itself. The correct grammar, “to be in interaction with...”, loses the primacy of the interaction.

Lisa experiences her pain as aliveness and her concept of herself as “heavy, complicated, slow” also shifts into feeling the aliveness within it all. In later sessions it becomes apparent that her body movement develops a smoother quality.

The concept of *inner*-directed movement, like the concept of the body felt from *inside*, refers to the immediacy of the self-propelling process. The body is both *in* interaction *and* living from itself.

### 3. *Holding both in embodied awareness to let fresh life come*

Here we create an interactive space between the sense of “Wholebody grounding” and the felt sense of something specific that wants our awareness. The human body can hold more than one kind of felt sense at the same time. By holding them both simultaneously, we create a space where they can interact without us *doing* the interacting. What we *do* is hold the interactional space of awareness, to let come what we do not know yet: the fresh life.

#### Case example: Jennifer

Jennifer has been working on separating from her life partner. She keeps having times of feeling overwhelmed and wants to confront the issue “even deeper.” Jennifer knows how to explore “grounding into being here” and I am with her, co-exploring it in myself. As Jennifer is connecting to the environment, she allows swaying, balancing movements. She feels “deeply supported by all that is life.” We co-hold this grounding space for a long time in silence. From this expanded sense of being here, she lets the felt sense of “all of that with the separation” come. She feels a tremor. I support her in allowing that. As it gets stronger I invite Wholebody grounding and allow time to hold both together in her awareness. I am co-being with her in that. I sense her going back and forth.

After a while the tremor gives way to a nodding and swaying. “It was the child feeling the dread of abandonment,” she says. (She had experienced temporary early separation from her mother.) After allowing the change time to be lived, she wants to hold the felt sense of the separation again, from this

new place. Her chest sinks in and the shoulders tense up. We both bring in the sense of grounded being. This time her body instantly straightens up by itself, makes a step to the side and walks to the door. Jennifer laughs in disbelief. “It cannot be so easy, ‘it’ wants me just to step away from the separation stuff and move on with my life.” This is what she then does in the weeks to come.

The zigzagging of awareness was a zigzagging between holding two kinds of felt senses: that of the issue of separation and her sense of “being supported by all this life.” In holding them both, the tremor could be lived through in awareness. From this new place of having completed the tremor reaction of the child into “a being here now,” Jennifer felt there was more that wanted to come. So this time the felt sense of the separation together with the sense of “being supported by all this life” instantly led her to straighten up her body with a simple stepping to the side—to the side of the separation stuff—to move on with her life. The felt sense of the larger existence can help so that a specific felt sense of “the whole challenging issue” can be fully experienced in awareness. The inner space is experienced as so much vaster. The dynamic interaction space of the two felt senses can facilitate the change in a non-doing way.

### 4. *Allowing life-forward movement to take root*

When a process comes to completion, clients often “want just to be there.” It is a time of appreciating the fresh life, living the change. Just by allowing the body time to live this stillness, there is a permission to be, “to own” more of who/how we are now. It is not about new content. If this body time is cut short, the fresh life may not take root and old patterns may re-emerge when rushed.

### Fundamentals of ongoing process

While the basics bring the specific foundation of Wholebody Focusing, the fundamentals point to the “classical” Focusing process, as it is relevant to WBF. For reasons of space I only want to outline them briefly here.

### 1. *Holding in awareness and letting fresh life come*

Gendlin's major contribution I see is in his deriving of consciousness as interactional process, as, for example, explicated in holding in awareness and letting it come. This is contrary to those Western and eastern traditions that understand consciousness as something like a light shining on something given in advance. In the sections above and below I have referred to this interactional character of the body-awareness process.

### 2. *Consciously dwelling in "not yet knowing"*

In allowing ourselves the attitude of not knowing, we actively make room for the chance of authentic process. As Gendlin writes in 1964: "Somehow, knowing is the problem, the individual should change, yet knowing is *not* the process of changing" (p.102). There may be small movements, murky sensations and stirrings in the phase of the just forming felt sense. The lack of clarity, the not yet *conceptually* knowing what this is about, may be felt as awkward or difficult to tolerate by the client. Grounding in the present can help the client to tolerate the not knowing. This interactive sense of "being here" keeps company with the sensitive space of "not yet knowing." It is not an ignorance of cultural, professional, or personal "knowings" or necessarily a lack of awareness of stuck places or wounds. The "not yet knowing" is making room for more...

By actively dwelling in "not yet knowing" we make space for sensing the whole unique present situation, which has never been here before. And by grounding into being here we invite all the "bigger implying" at, quite literally, a physical level.

So if I allow myself to know from habit or analysis, I may lose the surprising aliveness of the situation. It is the body's capacity to interact with all the implications of the situation (which are more than I could consciously know) that allows "carrying forward." Gendlin, in a personal communication (May 2013), said, "We do not have to do it all alone. We can make room for the bigger system to do it for us." As a therapist, I allow myself not to know how to be with my client. Instead, I consciously sense the momentary implyings of the situation, the whole field of our lived interactions, and allow room for authentic process... (c) by Astrid Schillings / www.focusing-institut.eu

### 3. *Listening with the whole body*

Listening and hearing with your whole body has an engaged and accommodating quality. It is not intrusive or judgmental. It is a resonating kind of embodied awareness, sensing the interactional field between client and therapist as well as what is emerging in the client and the therapist themselves. It is not a reflecting of the focuser's experience or bodily movements.

The metaphor of "reflecting" skips over the implicit intricacy of the person listening in a "being with" quality. There is really somebody in there, who is not just a reflecting mirror.

What is needed in this kind of listening is a groundedness that allows feeling what my felt sense of the client's process brings in my body as therapist and only from there, from my "being here," do I respond through movement/gesture, "saying back." Outwardly it may look like reflecting, but it will be felt as an alive "hearing back" by the client. This helps the client to carry his process forward in supporting him to sense and become aware of what he just experienced.

### 4. *Just sensing your aliveness and*

### 5. *Embodying the pause*

I wish only to acknowledge that 4 and 5 are important fundamentals active in WBFOT and are discussed elsewhere in this book. WBF returns to the phenomenological roots of Focusing, the deeper ground of body process, in a radical way.

### 6. *Wholebody awareness from person to person*

This "heartfelt connection" is addressed by Whalen and McEvenue in this book. I have referred to the open-interactional space between client and therapist when relevant above.

## Conclusion

As a therapist I use different language depending on who I am communicating with, and ensure that jargon does not get in the way. I may refer to "grounding into being here" as "us being part of the bigger system (of existence), all of evolution being here in this



situation,” or “grounding into our living body being in exchange with all that is here,” and letting a felt sense form of all that with “my struggle in the workplace,” “my fear in an aging body,” “my abyss of grieving the loss of my child.”

For some, the process of WBF may bring in spirituality and the quest for meaning or for others the bigger system and all evolution functioning as an expanded resource that they can tap into at any time. As a therapist working with WBF, I am committed to supporting clients into their next steps in meaning and living.

In WBFOT we allow ourselves “not to know” while connecting in a straightforward way into the physically felt interacting of our body life. We consciously make embodied room for this bigger interaction to participate in the unique steps, movements, postures or maybe words, which will come from this palpable intimacy with the living interaction.

This consciously embodied pausing in “not yet conceptually knowing” has a liberating quality when experienced. We are not simply waiting for the wisdom of our organism to take over. It is the crossing, interacting of the sense of the vastness of life and this very precise, existential piece of living right here, which, when held in dynamic awareness, can bring very precise steps. We develop embodied listening into the implicit of the whole situation and from this our experience understands itself, so to speak. Is this the openness Heidegger was concerned with? Is this the vast space Gendlin points to? I only know it starts in our living body with love for the small steps...every day.

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