

A Scientific Theory of Focusing Part Two

Please read Part 1 first – otherwise this may not make a lot of sense!

What's the difference between a feeling and a felt sense?

A key theoretical distinction in Focusing, Gendlin describes feelings as repetitive (the same old feeling over and over), not needing the body (being angry but not sensing an anger place in the body), and not changing (not carrying forward). Whereas a felt sense is freshly formed (the quality of it is particular to the moment), is bodily referenced (we find it by paying attention to the body), and tends to carry forward (in the shape of new thoughts and feelings unfolding).

Damasio's distinction between a feeling and the feeling of what happens may be analogous. His 'feeling' is a mapping of a bodily state that is not yet conscious and which may link with old feelings in somatic memory. Talking about our feelings may simply repeat existing patterns, whereas his 'feeling of what happens' is an in-the-moment experience that implies a connection with current changes in the body. The happening place is both brain and body.

Putting Gendlin and Damasio together: allowing a felt sense to form means using consciousness to attend to the felt quality of the present moment, including what happens in the body. 'Feelings' may be little more than old patterns, but if we engage the body sensing areas of the brain, the picture includes current bodily feedback and so we have a new pattern – a felt sense.

Of course, the way focusers talk of their 'felt senses' covers a spectrum of experiences, as I will discuss in a moment. Perhaps we could think of *emotional felt senses* that have physiological content (e.g. tightening in the chest, knotting in the stomach), and *calm felt senses* where the low level of emotional arousal enables the mind to become more right brain dominant and transcend its usual patterns, so that new associations can arise in the firing patterns in the brain. Gendlin usually emphasises the importance of a subtle felt sense of a whole situation forming inside, so I think his felt sense is the calm one that comes with low emotional arousal. It's a significant point he makes, because he is advocating an inner experience that is felt but that is not necessarily emotional – one that engages the brain's body sensing areas and therefore our right brain dominant capacities. And hence his special meaning of the 'body' that is not necessarily physiological. Our experience is that the felt sense may or may not come with distinct physiological content.

Damasio says feelings are cognitions. This may sound surprising, but I think it fits our experience. We can talk about sadness as a concept in a left brain dominant way, without needing to feel sad. Or we can invite a felt sense of sadness. This engages the body sensing regions, and connects us to the memory of feeling sad in the body. It may also trigger the body changing into a physiological state of sadness that we can then sense into.



How does attending to a felt sense lead to a felt shift?

Neuroscience has yet to examine how the deliberate use of attention to the inner state of the body leads to changes in body and brain. It has things to say about attention, but attention to our external senses, not our internal ones. So we will have to be a little speculative here. What we do know is that directing attention to the body is a right brain dominant activity and it fires up our two body sensing friends in particular: the anterior cingulate and the insula.

Attending to the body goes against the mind's tendency to attend more to the world outside. Damasio says the mind "draws a veil over the inner workings of the body", which I think is a statement of the obvious fact that when we are awake we need our attention on what we are seeing and hearing. Looking within is a specialist activity, and it means taking time out to do it. Of course, with normal outward attention, our brains follow what is happening in the body beneath the surface of awareness. The better integrated a brain is, the more its cognitive activity will be integrated with the body. And we can train ourselves to combine outer and inner attention, which is perhaps the ideal. Damasio's veil can be pierced, and usefully so.

Paying attention to the felt sense requires withdrawing some attention from the external environment. Most people seem to focus with their eyes closed a lot and requiring their listener to speak only after they themselves have spoken. So most attention is within. We shift from

what may have been a left brain dominant state (talking, thinking, doing emails) to what will probably be a right brain dominant state. That's because everything to do with feeling and body state tends to fire up more areas in the right brain than in the left. So we are likely to feel differently and to have different thoughts. One issue is that we may have more negative feelings – because positive feelings are left brain dominant and negative ones right brain dominant. This is a blessing and a curse: a blessing because we encounter feelings that we might otherwise miss (restricting our overall emotional experience), and a curse because we risk being overwhelmed by painful emotional states and becoming anxious. This is the double-sided coin we learn to negotiate in Focusing, and why an atmosphere of emotional safety and Gendlin's pointers to the nature of the felt sense with its low emotional arousal are important.

And on to felt shifts... somehow, by keeping our attention with the body, and allowing whatever feelings come to us as we do this, we may experience the body relaxing and shifting into a better feeling state. Breathing may deepen, muscles may relax (e.g. the diaphragm muscle that contracts to restrict our emotional expression), peristalsis may happen in the stomach (gurgles and other tummy sounds), blood chemistry may change with a different cocktail of hormones released, and endorphins (which make us feel better) may be released. This comes about through the parasympathetic nervous system, our autonomic switch for resting.

Openness to feeling enables stopped emotional processes from the past to carry forward.

Orienting attention to the body and permitting unwelcome as well as welcome feelings to come (rather than suppress or avoid them) must lead to new patterns of firing in the brain. Left brain dominant conscious control of our emotional experience gives way to a less controlled and more integrating flow of experiencing, permitting neural networks to 'free associate'. And the brain in turn signals the body that it can relax. The re-balancing of the mind allows the brain to tell the body it can let go of muscular holding – and we notice the ensuing felt shift.

A fuller picture of how attending to the body leads to felt shifts may be possible in future, but this is a start. And note that I have had to use some of Gendlin's terms to answer this question – they are really useful for thinking about what happens inside us.

Why do felt shifts feel good?

Tension and stress are replaced by relaxation. Felt shifts involve a change from sympathetic to parasympathetic states that feel better. It is not as simple as sympathetic feels bad whilst parasympathetic feels good. For example, sympathetic excitement can feel good whilst parasympathetic shut-down can feel bad. Nevertheless, relaxation generally feels better than tension. And the tension that eases in Focusing is tension that we can't just choose to let go of – rather, some inner connection needs to arise that enables the autonomic system to let go of it. Conscious experience comes into line with unconscious bodily regulation. Parasympathetic activation leads to more peristaltic movement in the gut, and that tends to feel good.

Felt shifts trigger the release of 'feel-good' chemicals. For example, *endorphins*, a *neuropeptide* affecting our emotional state, that are released in the brain in response to exercise, meditation, pleasurable social interaction, listening to music and many other things. They are natural opiates, reducing our experience of pain and stress. Felt shifts take us from isolated neurotic states of being to more open and connected ones – we rejoin the human race and feel more sociable again. Cue endorphin release. Another chemical that may be released is *dopamine*, a brain chemical that's associated with feeling energised and engaged with the world.

Felt shifts switch us back to a left brain dominant state. This may happen when a negative feeling state, that is right brain dominant, is resolved and we think in fresh ways. Positive feelings are associated with left brain dominant states. The changed signals coming from the right brain enable new patterns to fire up in the left brain and between the two hemispheres. We have a renewed interest in life, our mind is livelier. This may explain why right after a felt shift a novice focuser may say "thanks, that was great" and end their Focusing session prematurely – if you suddenly shift back to a left brain dominant state, that would be your natural inclination. It's a learnt behaviour to remain in an internally mindful state for longer to deepen the shift.

Felt shifts may enhance the brain's plasticity. If they do, it's because they increase neural integration and reduce dissociation. And this probably feels good too, perhaps because of the release of dopamine. Related to this point is that with the resolution that comes in a felt shift, the brain finds it easier to switch off from things other than the matter at hand. Switching off is what the brain is always trying to do, to conserve energy for what matters.

As we know, felt shifts feel good even when painful feelings emerge. This implies that there are two sorts of feeling good: a left brain dominant 'feel good' feeling that may inhibit unpleasant feelings (a dubious trade-off in the long run), and a sense of well-being in the organism that comes from allowing spontaneous emotional experience to flow so that nature takes its course. The implication is that suppressing unwanted feelings, or denying or avoiding them, does things to brain and body that do not feel good in the long run.

Is 'body wisdom' found in the body?

Not really, no. What we call 'body wisdom' are the thoughts and intuitions that arise when we engage the body sensing regions of the brain and notice the feedback the body gives us in the moment. In Focusing, different brain areas and different pathways probably light up than in 'normal' cognitive thought. We experience a more explicit interaction of brain and body than is usually the case, and it seems to us that our thoughts are arising 'in' the body. Our thinking includes rather than excludes body awareness (as usually happens), and is therefore of a different nature, with different thoughts arising. But 'wisdom' requires the specialist ability of the complex neural networks of the brain. The nervous system in the body can't do this and hasn't evolved to do so. Michael Gershon, the scientist behind the idea of a 'second brain' in the gut (the enteric nervous system), appears to be of this view.

So the idea of body wisdom points to the different way the mind works when we include our body state in the span of our attention. It may be the case that more integrated brains have a natural capacity for embracing body wisdom, so that body sensing is having a greater implicit role in the overall functioning of the brain than in a less integrated brain.

Do felt senses have to be felt in the body?

I think the answer is: no and yes. 'No' because focusers do not always locate their felt sense in the physical body, and there are neuroscientific reasons for this that I shall explain. And 'yes' because whether or not a felt sense is physically felt in the body, attention to bodily feeling is needed to fire up the brain's body sensing regions so they include our current body state on the stage of consciousness – I think this is the key to Focusing experience.

When we focusers talk about our felt senses, we sometimes mean a distinct physical sensation (such as a tightness in the chest or diaphragm or stomach), other times an 'as if' feeling or a 'somatic marker' (so it is more a recalled than a current body state, but we have to pause and think 'body' to find it). At still other times, we mean a 'subtle energy' experience or an 'aura' that may not be within the body – such experiences are common in Focusing and body therapy and other reflective practices, and they lie outside science's current field of understanding. And also, sometimes, I think we mean a thought that has a more reflective quality than usual and that leaves the body undisturbed – so we may say "that feels right". We can't say precisely where in our body the 'right' feeling is, but the thought has more than just a bare logic about it. It's a thought that we like the feel of.

I think reading Gendlin can lead to some confusion about the felt sense. On the one hand he talks about the subtle nature of the felt sense that is not a feeling or a sensation, on the other he talks of the chest tightening or the stomach getting knotted as examples. The variation in physiological content in these two sorts of experiences is on a spectrum of emotional arousal, where the higher the arousal, the more physiological content to the experience. But wherever we go on the spectrum, we need bodily attention and the body sensing regions of the brain. So Gendlin is right to emphasise the subtle felt sense that otherwise might be missed, but in learning Focusing it is easier first to notice anything and everything on the spectrum, then to discern his sort of felt sense as a particularly valuable aspect of experience. Emotional felt senses and calm felt senses are all felt senses, as I proposed above.

How can words 'come from' the body?

Of course they don't come from the body! They almost certainly 'come from' the speech generation areas of the left brain, if they come from anywhere. But they sometimes come to us in a different way when we are focusing, and there is a different quality to our use of language. And this must be related to the fact that by activating the body sensing regions of the brain, we are in a more right brain dominant state than we might be in normal conversation, so right brain areas have a greater influence on the generation of language from the left brain. It becomes less concrete and less logical, more poetic and symbolic, capable of embracing the

right brain's global take on the situation as well as the left brain's grasp of detail. And our use of language is more directly connected to the body, so we can feel the effects of it more readily.

In a previous paper, I suggested that Focusing might fix the big design fault of the human brain – it's capacity to allow language to disconnect us from our direct experience, because of the degree of left brain specialisation in both the generation and comprehension of speech. Most people find modes of language that reconnect them with the body an enjoyable counterbalance to the disconnecting uses we have to live with in our busy world. These include poetry, literature and story-telling – to these we can add language that comes with bodily attention.

How can the body determine whether something feels 'right'?

Again, it doesn't! Even if it feels like it does. I think what really happens is that in Focusing we are in a more right brain cognitive state in which feeling and bodily experience have a greater bearing on what we find to be 'right' or 'not right' than the rest of the time when our attention is directed more to others and to the expectations of logic. Perhaps we are thinking with the right brain rather than with the left – or maybe it is more that right and left brains are in better balance than 'normal' logical thinking allows for.

Attention to body and feeling will invoke Damasio's as-if feelings and somatic markers, formed from past experience, that he says work in the background of decision making. In Focusing these become foreground, and perhaps we are more aware of the rightness of something based on the totality of our past experience rather than the sway of current considerations. Wisdom?

Why does it help to have a listener?

'Affect is dialogic', says Colwyn Trevarthen, an Edinburgh professor who researches mothers and babies. That is, emotion and feeling are interpersonal experiences and are inseparable from our relationships with others. Even when we are alone, our feelings may be shaped by others' responses to us in the past. So when we encounter emotion and feeling in Focusing, it makes a difference to have another person with us. Even if we don't, we may imagine how another person might respond. And "the brain is the body's social organ", says Dan Siegel. The whole territory of feeling and the body implies we are not alone. A number of points flow from this.

Affect regulation, the ability to cope with the ups and downs of our emotional life, is learnt in infancy through our attachment relationships. Problematic attachment leads to problematic affect regulation, so that our feelings can get out of control and we may not know how to allow others to help us manage them. It follows that if as adults our capacity for affect regulation needs repair, then we need someone else to help us – to respond to us as mother didn't. The experiential listening skills of Focusing are of great value here. They communicate a very fundamental kind of empathy that perhaps mirrors the empathy that young children need.

Safety comes with another person you trust. Safety is important in Focusing, and it's an interesting concept in neurobiology. The work of Stephen Porges, a psychiatry professor in Chicago, describes an aspect of the nervous system he calls '*social engagement*' that's based around the *vagus nerve*, one of the cranial nerve bundles joining brain to body. The social engagement system can be in one of three states: *life threat* where you run or freeze up, *danger* where you become defensive or aggressive, or *safety* where you can engage with others in rewarding ways. For most people, the presence of an empathic other helps to create the sense of safety needed for Focusing, and maybe their early attachment relationships were experienced as safe. But this may not be true for everyone: if your early attachment relationships brought regular misattunements, then the presence of another may signal danger rather than safety. I put myself in this category – I have had to learn how to experience another person as safe.

Emotional processes are stopped by missing responses. As social and emotional creatures, we often need other people to respond to us if our emotional cycles are to be complete. If the other person doesn't respond, we may feel shame, because shame is what happens when we don't receive an attuned response, from infancy onwards. It stops us in our tracks, and our inner life remains hidden inside. This point has been well made by Gendlin, such as when he says "never mind what is not being felt, respond to what is being felt" in 'A Theory of Personality Change'.

The listener reinforces our capacity for paying attention to ourselves. Of course, having a listener also helps by reinforcing our attention – it's much easier to pay attention to our bodily feeling if there is someone with us expecting us to do so. The sensory signals from our body

are usually less clear than those from the outside world, and so it is harder to keep our attention on them.

Why does attending to the body tend to evoke images and transcendent experience?

Images are a right brain dominant function, and turning attention into the body puts us into a more right brain oriented state – so bodily attention is likely to evoke images. An objection to this hypothesis is that the right brain is not one thing, it is a collection of hundreds of neural areas. Bringing some of them foreground, e.g. the body sensing areas, does not mean that all the others will also light up, and so may not necessarily mean that areas involved in generating images light up. Nevertheless, our experience is that bodily attention does evoke images, and perhaps neuroscience will investigate this phenomenon one day.

A factor that may be relevant here is that the building blocks of the cortex, the *cortical columns* of neurons, connect differently in the two hemispheres. In the left brain, they tend to connect vertically (to other layers of columns) with the result that each column tends to be specialised for a certain function, whereas in the right brain they connect more horizontally with the result that the functions of right brain areas are more likely to knit together. This anatomical fact may be a basis for our experience that one right brain dominant function tends to lead to another: e.g. bodily attention evokes images, images evoke emotion, and emotion evokes symbols.

Similar arguments can be made about transcendent experience, which seems to start in the right brain and if allowed to continue changes the whole brain. This has been observed from recording brain wave patterns in people who are meditating or having an area in their right temporal lobe (famously termed the 'God spot') artificially activated. You might imagine that the body and transcendent experience were at opposite ends of the spectrum but this is not necessarily so. It may be that bodily awareness tends to lead us away from habitual states of consciousness organised around language, and it is these that tend to preclude transcendence.

Conclusion

This is really the beginning of a scientific theory of Focusing, rather than a complete and polished version. Having written it, I can sense more questions building in my mind, and more ideas that may want expression. There may be some errors and omissions in my relaying of the science, and I'm not convinced my account of what happens inside us holds water at each point as thoroughly as I would like it to. So I may well do a revised version in a while. In the meantime, your responses and objections to what I have written here will be invaluable in helping me to build the theory further.



References available on request.

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August 2010