

## ***Navigating Strong Reactions While Focusing***

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We all have a trauma story. We all get triggered and become dysregulated at times. So, how do we keep ourselves safe when strong or overwhelming feelings arise while Focusing and, how do we support someone who reacting to strong emotions during their session?

**Begin by becoming present.** We pause and ground ourselves in our physical body and orient to the present moment. It is very important to first invite yourself to become physically present *before* going into the feeling body. We then bring our attention and awareness inward, sensing how it feels to be you from the inside (our feeling body). Then we check and notice and acknowledge what is there. At this point we usually find something that wants our attention and begin to Focus on it.

### **What if by simply going inside we are flooded with emotion and overwhelm?**

To be overwhelmed means we are identified or merged with something. There are three states of experience: merged/identified, exiled/dissociative, or present. We are either in the soup, ignoring the soup, or present with it. When we are merged with a part of ourselves, we feel its feelings and we think its thoughts. We see the world through its experience. When something is being exiled, we may be acting out of 'its' experience without awareness of doing so.

If we are triggered by a memory we may or may not be able to hold enough presence to continue a session. A trauma place holds all the dysregulated feelings we had at the time of the trauma. If we are not hijacked by fight, flight or freeze states, we can use Presence Language to dis-identify and have some space between you and the overwhelming something.

### **The key is to create some space between you and it.**

For example, you can say, "I'm sensing something in me that is overwhelming and difficult to be with." Then, "I'm acknowledging it and finding the right distance with which to be with it." Whether we refer to it as fear, shame, terror or feeling crazy, it is still something that can be dis-identified from, given some safety, and presence. It is something in us that we live with already.

### **But what if you can't do that?**

You can open your eyes and talk to your partner and let them know you are struggling to be present and safe with your something. Grounding in the body is particularly helpful. Feeling your feet on the ground, your seat in the seat, your hands in your lap. Following your breath in and out. Find positive resources like looking out the window to nature or seeing your Companion's smiling face while trying to support you. You may be able to continue with the Focusing or you may want to stop and simply acknowledge something is too overwhelming at

this moment in time to work with. That may be what we CAN do to take care of ourselves in that moment.

**Focusing is an experiencing process.** Sometimes what we are experiencing feels overwhelming. It is not the Focusing that causes overwhelm; it is there already. Focusing does open a door and sometimes it blows open before we were aware of the wind. That is your body's way of saying "I need some distance from this!" Until we feel regulated, safe and are present, Focusing is difficult or perhaps not possible.

#### **What can the Focuser do when something in the dyad does not feel safe?**

Use Presence Language: Say out loud or to yourself, "I'm sensing something in me that is not feeling safe." Acknowledge that something in you isn't feeling safe and see if you can be with it. Perhaps placing a hand gently where it doesn't feel safe in your body and letting it know you are there keeping it company.

You may need to discern what in the dyad is not safe and share that with your Companion. The Companion may be doing something (asking questions) that does not feel right. Remember the expression, Empowered Focuser, Relaxed Companion. The Focuser always has the right to speak up and ask for what they need. It's okay to say, for example, "Please don't ask questions. I just want reflections." Sometimes sessions need to pause to discuss something and sort it out. In rare cases you may need to stop.

We teach being present, listening, reflecting, and guiding in that order. Sometimes a companion moves too quickly or goes beyond offering guiding invitations and it feels like a boundary is being crossed. That is a good time to reset the session with a reminder to the companion with a simple statement like, "I know you are trying to be helpful but what I need from you right now is just to reflect my felt sense experience." The session may need to be paused and have a discussion (with eyes open) about the predicament.

#### **How can the Companion support the Focuser when the Focuser is struggling?**

As the Companion your job is to be present and reflect what is being conveyed. The simplest thing you can do is to stay connected to the Focuser's process through reflections. A good Companion follows the Focuser. Sometimes a Focuser encounters something surprising or overwhelming. They may become identified with the something and your job at that point is to help them ground in the body and regain safety and presence. The use of Presence Language is so helpful. It provides acknowledgement of the identification and the need to step back and dis-identify from the overwhelming something.

If the Focuser is unable to regain a sense of presence you can pause the session and discuss what is happening for the Focuser and ask what they need. It may be as simple as clarifying some confusion in which case the session can continue. It may be that the Focuser is a bit

shaken and just needs to stop the session while they regain a sense of safety and groundedness with you. Your presence and smile will be key for them regaining safety and presence.

**The most important thing I want to say is that every reaction you have is your reaction for some good reason!** It is something in you and your experience and shows how your autonomic nervous system has been shaped by experience. It is reacting at this moment for some good reason. The phrase *'for some good reason'* points to the fact that your experience is meaningful and purposeful. Once we are present, grounded and centered we see this about ourselves: "Oh *that's* what was going on with me."

Sometimes we experience overwhelming feelings. That is not something we can prevent altogether. Emotions come of their own volition. Once we are sensing the overwhelming feelings the next step is ours to make. If we can pause and notice we are having a reaction, we can make a choice to be with the feelings (the part of you reacting). If we choose not to be with them at that time, we will need to be with them in the future.

Everyone's life experience is unique. Though I don't know your personal trauma history, I can teach you how to be present, grounded, and open to your experience so that you can begin to grow a nurturing inner relationship with anything that emerges along the way.

As you continue to learn Focusing you will learn more about what to do and when, for yourself, your partner, and clients you work with. It is hard to teach everything at once. There is a progression and lots of little steps along the way.

**Working with trauma is an off-road adventure.** No paved roads, street signs, or guard rails. It can be messy. Keeping a client safe means keeping them safe with you and regulated when they leave your office or before the telehealth meeting ends. People get triggered and dysregulated in a flash. It is important to know what to do when that happens. Mostly that involves grounding in the body and helping clients feel safe and connected with you so they can once again feel safe with themselves.

**Sometimes our journey puts us in touch with our wounds and we need extra support.** Please ask for support if you need it. Learning Focusing and Focusing-Oriented Therapy is about being regulated, safe and present with our and one another's experience. When something gets in the way of that we need to pause and turn toward what is in the way and be with that. *The path is the path* says Pema Chodron. What emerges before you is the lesson *and* the teacher. Focusing is a way to notice that and learn from it.

**Additional Resources on Focusing Partnerships are posted in the Student Section of our website:**

- [Safe Focusing with Almost Any Partner](#) by Ann Weiser Cornell
- [Partnership Practice Etiquette](#) by Jeffrey Morrison
- [Guidelines for Partnerships for Both Focuser and Listener](#) by Renee La Roi and Greg Madison