



GUIDELINES FOR PARTNERSHIPS FOR BOTH FOCUSER & LISTENER

In any Focusing partnership, although the act of being the Focuser and the act of being the Listener are very specific, both Focuser and Listener engage as equals, both persons have the right and responsibility to keep themselves safely grounded in their bodily experiencing. Many partnership guidelines rightly describe how to protect the Focuser's process from interruption, analysis etc by the Listener, but there is not a lot written to describe how the Listener also needs to assess what feels comfortable and safe for them in the partnership.

Focusing partnerships are being encouraged within the Focusing Community. A lot can be gained from these partnerships. Many people involved in these partnerships may be new to the concept of setting boundaries in relationships. It is very important that boundaries are kept clear and consensual in a focusing partnership. If clear boundaries are not maintained, it is more likely that problems can arise.

Boundaries that protect the person while Focusing have been clearly set out and are consistently taught in preparation for Focusing Partnerships. Ongoing relational boundaries are continually addressed by the feeling in the body, for example, how close together to sit today, how much content to disclose about this issue... Boundaries can be adjusted through gentle feedback before or after a session.

In addition we would like to describe some explicit guidelines from the experience of the person who is Listening.

Of course no guidelines can account for every situation that may arise. When the guidelines we propose below are not enough to facilitate communication and resolution, we would recommend that the partners consider asking a *Focusing mediator*, workshop trainer, or peer, to listen to both sides of the situation in the hopes that each may come to understand the other better, either in preparation for ending the partnership or in order to establish boundaries that are conducive to each person's process.

Some basic reminders:

- Every focusing/listening partnership is voluntarily entered into, either for one exchange, or ongoing as agreed. However, unlike a therapy contract, a FL partnership may stop and/or re-start at any time. It is good to periodically make clear the expectations of both parties regarding the duration and frequency of sessions.
- A focusing session can be paused at any point by the Focuser or Listener. Do not feel you have to continue a session if you begin to feel unsafe. It is good to take some time to settle the session as gently as possible, then if appropriate address what has happened.
- If the content of the focusing session is directed at the listener, the listener can explore their felt sense of this in order make sure that this is OK with them. It may be useful to take some time between turns in order to check in with each other that this content feels fine for both people.

The partnership should be clear and trusting enough that the Focuser can attend to their own 'inner process' rather than the dynamics of the partnership. However, partnerships can elicit feelings that are usefully and safely explored as long as the Focuser owns them as 'their process' and the Listener feels comfortable with the Focuser's explorations. If the Focuser wants to work out issues of so-called transference, issues that arise from the interpersonal relationship and are directed towards who the listener has come to symbolize for the Focuser, this dynamic may become confusing and uncomfortable. Caution is advised. These explorations as Focusing content are best named explicitly and agreed to in the partnership. This is the area where a partnership might reasonably be paused so that the dynamic can be explored in an ongoing therapeutic relationship. A good idea is to build review session into a partnership, simply to check how the partnership is going and how much longer it might last, etc.

VERY IMPORTANT:

A focusing/listening partnership is not a replacement for professional therapy. Focusing/listening is an egalitarian agreement between two people committed to exploring their inner experience, it does not have the same responsibilities as a consistent relationship with a paid and trained professional.

WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE

We do not assume that if something does not feel right between the Focuser and Listener that it should just be focused away. It may be a feeling-response to something that has gone off-track in the partnership. For example, it can happen that the **Focuser** begins to use their time to process TOWARDS the listener, as one might explore past issues in relation to a therapist. This might be useful for the Focuser but it may change the FL partnership into something else.

Unsafe and *uncomfortable* - what is the difference?

When listening to your focusing partner focusing, if you begin to feel distracted by something

each time the person focuses this might be *uncomfortable*. The listener may want to focus on this *uncomfortable-ness* with another focuser to understand it more. It could be that something is usefully elicited in the Listener that they can then explore in their own time.

Feeling *unsafe* is more urgent and less common. This is where you may no longer feel you can listen in an open receiving way and feel threatened somehow by something that is happening.

Content from the focusing session might impact upon the Listener in very helpful ways and sometimes in less helpful ways. See steps below for when you feel *uncomfortable* and when you feel unsafe.

STEPS FOR WHEN THE LISTENER FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE WHAT CAN THEY DO?

1. Focus on their feelings when it comes to their turn, if they are comfortable focusing on this felt sense with their partner. It may be a felt sense of the session, or at least start out that way but in Focusing we are aware that feelings often show surprising aspects once they begin to open.
2. Make sure to build in time between turns so that any partnership dynamics can be processed explicitly with eyes open, in a Focusing way.
3. Own what might be triggered in them as their own process when that is the case and not to 'blame' the Focuser if something has arisen in them during the Focuser's session.
4. They may want to Focus with someone else on the uncomfortable feeling.

It is also possible however that feeling *uncomfortable* might be the first sign of feeling *unsafe*. Unsafe could be described as when there is no longer a balance in the focusing partnership or the listener feels threatened in *any way*. There might be a general sense of something not being right. For example, some listeners might start feeling unsafe if the focuser's session content seems to revolve around their relationship with the listener instead of an inner process unrelated to the Focuser. It is good practice if the Focuser checks out that material triggered by the "you and me" of the partnership is OK with the listener. It might be OK at first to the listener, but if at any point it does not feel OK, stop. Each person can own their own process and take responsibility for continually checking that what is happening in the partnership feels like Focusing and feels OK. A listener may have a particular sensitivity at any point, for example they might have had a recent bereavement and the Focuser needs to attend to a similar feeling of loss but for that listener it feels too much just then. It is always best to be upfront if you are not able to set aside your own feelings enough to listen. We are human and we have limitations. It is no one's fault.

STEPS FOR WHEN THE LISTENER FEELS UNSAFE WHAT CAN THEY DO?

1. Stop the session - If the Listener feels unsafe they cannot listen anyway.
2. Stop what is happening and explain that it does not feel safe for them. Be as sensitive as possible to the Focuser.
3. Take a time out and then return to process what they feel, if the Focuser is willing to do that.

4. If one or both people feel this is a partnership issue, seek support from another Focusing person who can Listen to them and help them explore if this is a partnership issue or a specific personal response to specific material...
5. If either person feels uncomfortable or unsafe continuing the partnership the next step is to stop the partnership as respectfully as possible. BOTH listener and focuser may request the support of another focuser to understand what has happened.

CLUES FOR WHEN POSSIBLE issues HAVE arisen IN A PARTNERSHIP:

- When the content of the focusers time starts to involve the listener -- when their sessions are constantly about "you and me" rather than about their individual life issues.
- When there is an attraction between partners or indication for more contact so that one or other person feels uncomfortable.
- When there is recurring content from the Focuser that makes the listener feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- When the partnership begins to feel unbalanced or more like a 'therapeutic relationship' where the listener is expected to fulfill a role that is more than listening, either within partnership time, or outside the sessions.
- When the roles between the people begin to feel more one-sided or not equal. For example if one person is seeking contact between partnership sessions and the other person is not wanting that.
- When the listener feels they cannot handle the depth/difficulty of what the focuser is dealing with - - when it feels like too much for the listener in any way.

If a friendship has developed outside of the focusing partnership, it is more likely that sensitivity around boundaries becomes important in order to keep separate what happens in the focusing partnership and what happens outside.