

Help for the Helpers: The Power of Focusing Partnerships

By Joan Klagsbrun and Lynn Preston

It's not a secret; most of us become therapists because we want to help people thrive. We want to succeed in helping them feel less alone with their troubles and find ways to transform their weighty, seemingly intractable problems into workable challenges. This is what keeps our professional juices flowing—the experience of making a positive, significant difference to the struggling people we see in our therapy rooms.

Yet we are not miracle workers. When we're slow to help a client get back on her feet—and this happens more than we might like to admit—it's not always easy to maintain our enthusiasm and confidence about our work, or even our basic composure. For instance, a therapist named Sally recently told me the story of seeing a 34 year-old woman who'd fallen into a deep depression following a rejection by a man. As the client slouched into the therapy room for her tenth visit, she reenacted the opening scene of each and every appointment thus far: while lowering herself heavily onto a chair, she sighed, gazed down at the rug and announced tonelessly, "I'm still depressed."

Sally found herself retorting sharply, "So why don't you try to make some of the changes we have been talking about?"

As she watched her client go pale, Sally was aghast: *Where had that impatient tone of voice, tinged with judgment, come from?* This fed-up discouragement had been building for several weeks with this client. As Sally struggled to slow her breathing, a small inner voice whispered something she'd never dared think before: *Am I burning out?*

A growing body of research indicates that when we don't feel effective in our work, burnout is likely to follow. Slowly but insistently, we begin to feel heavy-hearted and demoralized in the therapy room. Although we may not quite understand the source of our malaise, we know something doesn't feel right. We may wonder whether we have chosen the wrong profession.

Or maybe we just need a way to freshly grasp what's actually brewing inside us, and use that knowledge to begin to rediscover the energy and excitement that drew us to the therapy profession in the first place. In fact, as long-time clinicians in private practice, the two of us have discovered how to do just that through a powerful process called *Focusing Partnership*.

Focusing and The Felt Sense

Unlike peer supervision, which tends to be more analytical and focuses on the client (limited to problem solving about clients), this two-person encounter is about the not-yet-verbalized issues of the clinician. It lets us dive deep into our embodied knowing to find what's actually troubling us, and use that knowledge to recover our zest for our work and our lives.

Focusing Partnerships evolved out of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy, developed in the 1960s by University of Chicago philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin. In collaboration with Carl Rogers, Gendlin interviewed hundreds of therapy clients to try to tease out the elements that made for successful outcomes. To their surprise, they discovered that the number-one factor influencing therapeutic success was the client's ability to pause and find within their bodies the felt meaning of their experience—the implicit "more" that is right beneath the surface of our words and thinking. Gendlin found that some clients, the ones who used therapy most effectively, could sense into this implicitly felt "more" and speak *from* their experience rather than *about* it. Gendlin coined the term *felt sense* to describe this deep, nonverbal awareness that's

not yet available to the conscious mind. In the arena of clinical burnout, the felt sense might show up as the heavy dread in your stomach as a particular client walks into your office, or the jittery flutter in your throat as you ponder how to respond to another client's insistent challenge: *How can this therapy actually help me?* But the felt sense isn't just a way to get in touch with our experience. It also has the power to gently propel us out of our stuck places and move us forward in our daily lives. Gendlin and Roger's studies further found that when individuals paused and tuned into a bodily sense, they could eventually articulate what had previously been outside of awareness. What was even more meaningful was that this articulation of the felt sense naturally produces what Gendlin called a "step"—a small release and an increase in life energy that moves in the direction of healing and growth. It wasn't long before Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy expanded to include Focusing partnerships between therapists who paired up regularly to support each other in doing this deep work of self-discovery. Typically, participants get together in person, on the phone, or via Skype every week for an hour or so. During a session, each individual receives equal time to explore an issue of his or her choice.

In our own experience, the special power of Focusing Partnership is its ability to take us out of the aloneness of carrying the heavy responsibilities inherent in our profession. It's an antidote to the kind of circular thinking that we tend to get mired in when we feel like we are going it alone. It allows us to feel safe and attended to as we plunge into parts of ourselves that are still fuzzy or unknown. And it helps us to find new aspects of our situations and new possibilities in ourselves. While we sometimes use the process to plumb issues in our personal lives, we also find it effective in helping us discover what is hampering or limiting us in our work. Over and over, our joint Focusing sessions leave us refreshed and renewed, equipped with a new insight or action step that that make us more clinically effective and once again enthused

about doing psychotherapy. In fact, Focusing Partnerships are an essential part of our self-care and care of our clients. For example:

“Like Crumpled Newspaper”

Liz, a colleague of ours, had recently brought her concern about working with Sherry, a difficult client, to her peer supervision group. “She exhausts me and I’m not sure why,” Liz sighed. A couple of members of the group pointed out that Sherry seemed to have borderline features. They made sound suggestions about establishing clearer boundaries and commiserated with Liz about the challenges of seeing someone with this complex diagnosis.

But Liz felt that something deeper was keeping her feeling ineffective with and discouraged by Sherry—something she couldn’t quite understand or put into words. That evening, she called Jack, her Focusing partner of two years, for their regular weekly session.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Jack invited Liz to begin the Focusing process. “Take your time sensing into how you feel right now,” he said. Liz responded by closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Before long, she noticed a distinct clutching sensation in the center of her stomach.

“It feels tense and tight,” she said, still keeping her eyes closed. “I’m so frustrated with my client Sherry, the one I’ve talked with you about before. My belly feels like a crumpled newspaper whenever I think about it.” She placed her hand on her stomach, rubbing it distractedly. “And I can’t stand this feeling!”

Reflecting back to Liz the clutching sensation in her belly and how it felt like a crumpled newspaper, Jack invited her to say more.

“Well,” she said, “I guess I’m starting to dread sessions with Sherry because of her chronic: *My life is unbearable. Therapy isn’t working. Fifty minutes isn’t enough time. Can’t you*

give me a few more minutes? I'm exasperated!" Liz exclaimed, surprising herself as the words formed. "Nothing I do is helpful! Everything I say seems to miss the mark."

Slowly and softly, Jack repeated Liz's words back to her. Then he said, "How about if you pause now and see if you can get an intuitive felt sense for the whole situation ... Sherry's blaming ... your own experience of clutching ...the crumpled sensation ..."

After a few moments of silence, Liz sighed and nodded. "I'm always trying too hard with her," she said. "Trying to no avail. I feel like I'm failing."

After a moment, Jack mirrored her by saying, "Something in you feels it has to keep trying and trying even though it doesn't help. You're trying too hard."

All at once, Liz sat up straight. "Oh, wow," she whispered. "My younger sister. She has a lot of problems—with her kids, with her job—and for years, I've been trying to help her. But nothing I say or do is right. Nothing makes her happy. She always has a reason why something I suggest won't work. All this trying leaves me drained and depleted, crumpled, like yesterday's newspaper."

Jack nodded. "So much of this is familiar, like with your sister," he said. "So much trying, and then the depletion."

Liz nodded, eyes closed.

"Maybe," said Jack, "you could just be with that whole drained, depleted, crumpled sense. Kind of sit next to it and see what it might have to say to you."

Liz paused for several moments, listening inwardly. Then it came to her. "It says to just let go and accept what is. I can't save this client or my sister, and my urgency and anxiety get in the way of being able to connect with either of them."

She took a deep, relaxed breath. “Something’s shifted. I feel lighter.” As she opened her eyes, she found herself chuckling softly with relief.

In her next session with Sherry later that week, Liz felt less defeated and more creative in her responses, which allowed them to unlock from their longstanding power struggle and begin to genuinely connect. At one point Liz responded to Sherry’s demands for more by saying “Of course you are disappointed and hungry for more. I am trying to cook us a great dinner but you’ve had a life time of starvation.” When Sherry launched into one of her perennial complaints, Liz was able to feel compassion for Sherry’s disappointment without feeling personally reactive. She was even able to playfully joke with her. When Sherry complained, “How come you only check your text messages once a day, when I want to hear back from you sooner?” Liz joked, “I’m such a dinosaur that I still look to my phone messages rather than my texts.” Sherry teased back, “I am going to have to buy you a fancy new smart phone so you will be looking at it all the time!” After Sherry left the office at the end of the session, Liz was pleasantly surprised to find herself looking forward to seeing her next several clients, rather than getting mired in her usual post-Sherry exhaustion and self-reproach.

Liz’s Focusing Partnership helped her lift the burden of her isolation and overwhelm by creating a bond of safety and exploration. This unique kind of connection gave Liz permission to slow down and be silent. In fact, she learned to regard silence as a friend and a pathway to deepening the moment-to-moment experience of troubling thoughts and feelings. The structure and form of the Focusing Partnership facilitated a safe inviting space in which Liz could touch into the felt sense of her “crumpled newspaper” feeling and find in herself the “*more*” of what she was experiencing with Sherry. She was invited by her partner not to try to solve or fix the problem, or simply vent about her frustrations, but to slow down and pause—to reconnect with

her larger self, and allow the deep personal meanings that had been hidden to emerge. By paying compassionate attention to her inner experience, Liz' relationship to her client was able to radically shift.

Focusing Partnership is a new form of peer support that brings attention to exactly where we feel stuck or blocked. (Although there are other ways for therapists to get support, a Focusing Partnership can offer a unique healing process in which partners engage in a safe exploration of what is important but not yet in awareness.) These experiential sessions give us the rare opportunity to have maximal company with a skilled listener with minimal intrusion, as we reflect on our therapy work or on a personal issue. Our partner invites us to talk about a situation and then when we have said all we know, we pause and explore what we haven't yet been able to fully say. It is a kind of connection that is honest and intimate without any need to tell the other either the back-story or to report back after the partnership session ends. Jack would not ask Liz how it went with Sherry the next time they spoke. She could share about it if she wished or bring up a new issue to work on. (One is always free to either share or to keep private the details of what one is working on. For example, you might want to process something that feels sad or embarrassing without ever saying more than that about it.)

When going it alone, therapists can be burdened with too heavy a load of desperate expectations and needs of suffering clients, carrying us down the road of depletion, isolation and eventual burnout. But by regularly attending to our wellbeing in weekly or biweekly Focusing Partnerships, we find ways to release ourselves from the quagmire of therapeutic and personal challenges and rekindle the passion that brought us to our profession.

What Makes a Focusing Partnership Work

Listen, Don't Direct. A key quality in a successful Focusing Partnership is a commitment to active listening. This means that when you listen to your partner, you ask few if any questions, give no advice, and offer no interpretations. Instead, you informally mirror your partner—usually a few evocative words will suffice—allowing the movement of the session to flow directly from the felt sense of the speaker. In the session above, for instance, Jack did this when he said, “Something in you feels it has to keep trying and trying even though it doesn't help.” When the Focuser hears her own words from a compassionate, attuned listener, something profound often begins to happen. She begins to discover for herself the deeper meanings of her felt sense and what might help her to move forward given the issue at hand.

Share the Time. During each Focusing Partnership session, be sure to share time equally so that each person has a chance to both accompany and be listened to by the other. The equal time rule not only keeps the partnerships from becoming asymmetrical, but also builds resourcefulness. When you feel submerged by your own issues and are tempted to talk overtime (especially when your partner assures you that he's doing just fine this week), you could miss the chance to experience the satisfaction and empowerment of helping your partner.

When Questions May Help. During the Focusing process an occasional, open-ended question from a listener may be useful. For example, you might ask the speaker a question designed to help her touch down into her bodily sense of the issue, rather than staying at the cognitive, descriptive level. Jack did this with Liz when he asked, “How about if you pause now and see if you can get an intuitive felt sense for the whole situation?” But be judicious here. Where questions are concerned, less is usually more. Your primary goal is to stay present with your partner.

Ask for What You Need. In a Focusing Partnership, both partners lean into what's most important in the moment for the focuser. So at times, the partner who's focusing may want to briefly interrupt the process to directly ask the listening partner for something he or she needs. *Could you say that back to me so I can better hear what I just said?* Or, if the listener is offering more mirroring than the focuser wants at the moment, the focuser can say, *Can you stay silent right now? I just need your presence as I tell you what's been happening.* The listener knows not to take these directions personally. His role is to hold the process for the focuser, not pushing the river but simply following the currents wherever they may lead.