

Focusing-Oriented Therapy and Complex Trauma One: Working with Embodied Trauma

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Asking: by Shirley Turcotte

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Revised/Reformatted by Gabrielle Hoffman

Note from Jeffrey:

For Shirley Turcotte, FOTCT is client centered and therapist directed. There are times when working with trauma the therapist needs to take charge of the session to keep the client safe. FOT allows us to enter, with the client, memory places that can be opened, worked with, and closed within an hour session. To do so safely, especially at the beginning of therapy, the therapist may need to “direct” the session with their felt sense, words, and prompts. Clients are often not able to do their own Focusing when working with traumatic memory places. They need the skillful presence and direction of the therapist to enter, be-with and unwind wounded and stuck interactions. This requires the therapist to be an engaged participant in the interaction, naming what they sense and see for the client. Clients are often in speechless places and need the words of the therapist to stay grounded, present, and safe. Being “directive” can last a moment or most of a session. It is not something we do to the client; it is a way of being with the client, so they don’t slip into overwhelm and re-traumatization.

Focusing Asking:

- Bring awareness into the body and find something that wants to communicate with you. Sit down with this inner part to learn its name and its story.
- To find out what a felt sense is, you must ask it directly. Spend time with it. A minute or so of staying with the felt sense can feel very long.
- Find and use a handle to help make the felt sense vividly present.
- Ask into it using open-ended questions. Let the fast answers from the head go by. Wait for an answer from the felt sense (the implicit self).
- The first felt sense places can be vicarious memory pieces. You may want to get under that to find your way to the authentic self-places.
- Wait for a body shift when receiving the answer. The questions should be open and wide enough, so the body has room and permission to offer an answer.
- An attitude of openness and curiosity is important. Answers to questions will come. They can be surprising and unexpected. Allow the answers to be, to have space. Set aside the need to contradict them or impose more logical solutions. Allow the body to feel the rightness of the answer as it comes.
- Remember that you are not asking a question of the focuser, but rather you are guiding the focuser to ask the felt sense a question.
- The felt sense may not shift and answer right away. Take some time. The time spent sensing it is crucial. That is Focusing.

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Issues of Safety:

- You need to attend to safety throughout the asking stages.
- When you sense the focuser may be overwhelmed or losing touch with their observer self, help them hold space for the felt sense without getting lost in it.
- Things you might ask:
 - *Is it okay to be with the felt sense for a while?*
 - *Take a moment to be more comfortable being here with what is so uncomfortable.*
 - *What do you need to be where it is so uncomfortable?*
 - *What do you need to do to be able to sit beside this uncomfortable spot?*

Types of Questions:

- First try *general* questions (broad and open-ended):
 - What is this?
 - What more is there?
 - What would it like you to know?
 - What does this connect to in your life?
 - How is this like your life?
 - What brings this now?
- Then try *crux* questions (get to the essence of an experience):
 - What is the crux of this?
 - What is the worst of this?
 - What gets you the most about this?
 - How old are you there in this place? (only when you see regression).

Memory Places/Flashbacks/Regression:

- Look around the body. Is there a possible memory/flashback “hanging” there?
- Look for speechlessness. If it is there, sense into your own felt sense.
- Is something being projected into you, esp. big emotions like helplessness, fear, anger, confusion, stuckness, etc.?
- Start to “flush out” the memory piece.
- *“Can you notice with me, staying how you are there now, the area around our throat and mouth. It is as if you can’t speak in the spot where you are. Do I have that right?”*
- ***By saying** *“in the spot where you are”* you are containing the memory/flashback and helping the *observer* part of them to respond rather than react to what is in the room.
- You may see the focuser pull back and away from a *something* there from a regressed place.
“From here it looks as if we are in a place where you were pulling away from a someone. Do I have that right?”

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***By naming it** as a place and putting it in the context of the past, it helps their adult observer to stay present to integrate the memory piece.

- Once the adult observer is present, you can start handing back the projections carefully.
- *“It is as if you are showing us a time where you were terrified and hopeless. Have I got that right?”*
- Remember to keep your tenses straight so the observer gets that this is a then place, not a now place.
- Believe how it was. Offer no false hope, or it will be handing out band-aids only.
“Oh, we are at the place where you lost your father forever. Have I got that right?”
“We are at the place where you will never have the mother you needed.”
- Help them to accept those truths and losses.
- Help them discover the resources within, or they would not be here today.

Example:

Regressed Focuser: “I want her. I want her. I want her... I’ll die without her.”

Possible Companion Response:

“Here is where you wanted her so much and you were sure you would die without her... And she never came... And you never did die... That is a lot of loss to accept inside there... Does this place know that you are fine and whole without that?... Does this place know the adult part of you?”

- Develop self-soothing. Sometimes it helps that place to know it is not alone and that millions of children grow up fine without having had people love them (counter to popular belief).
- Sometimes you can move it even further:
*“Here is that place where you never got what you needed... Where **did** you get raised lovingly? Check inside.... Where did you go for that nurturance? Was there a tree or an animal or a something that raised you well, despite all of that?”*
- Once they connect the memory of what was working so well to what didn’t work, a big shift occurs. Often, they are profoundly moved to find that they had universal parenting, rather than people parenting. It is amazing what people get raised by: a flock of birds, trees, wheat fields, the sun, etc.
- If someone gets lost in a flashback, keep telling them (not asking them) where they are and what you are seeing.

Example:

Focuser regresses to a spot where it looks like they lost consciousness in a rape scene and maybe stayed stuck there.

Possible Companion Response:

“This looks like a flashback. You are at a spot where you were losing consciousness when something was happening to you. From here it looks like a possible rape scene. Your lower body

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was shifting rhythmically, and now your eyes are rolling, and your body is dropping off. It is as if this place doesn't know that you survived this. Here is where you maybe think you died. You are maybe upset and afraid you were going to die or upset and afraid you didn't die..."

- The more you tell what you see specifically and tell about your felt sense client-projection observations, in a firm and clear grounded voice, the more the client will soften and open to their adult observer present self.
- Try to find the meaning, or *unfinished business*, from any memory/flashback place. That implicit past place may have all kinds of irrational thinking and decisions that need interrupting.
- Other possible questions you can ask:
 - When do you first remember sensing something like this before?
 - Is there something you or it needs to say to each other?
 - What would it say if it could speak?
 - What is the newness about all this?

Forward-Direction Questions:

- If there is some movement, but it still feels unfinished, ask forward direction questions. These can help nudge toward movement.
- These should not be used first, but only after time spent in the crux. If used too soon, these become a form of rescuing. This takes away from the opportunity to acknowledge and be with something, to get the most from it.
 - What does this need?
 - Which way is fresh air?
 - How would this feel if it were all okay?

Cycles of Felt Sensing:

- One session may have several cycles of felt sense/handle/asking, felt sense/handle/asking.
 - Once you have a response to Asking, does it feel finished, or is there something more? There may be a new felt sense is there.
- If it feels like more is there: find a handle and be with the new felt sense or provide closure by marking the place and agreeing to return to it later.

When Completing:

- It is critical that the focuser is all the way back to the present.
- Ask the client to check in with their entire body and see that every part is all the way back to being all *adult*.
- **Close the circle.** Whatever they first brought as an issue needs to be checked back into to see how it is now different and see if they can sense a small step about that now.