

Elusive Felt Sensing: A Comprehensive Approach to Difficult Felt Sense Formation **By Robert L. Lee**

For over a decade I have been interested in the dilemma of a felt sense not forming. I have been interested in this as a focusing teacher, as a focusing oriented psychotherapist and as a focusing theoretician.

As a theoretician it would bother me that the felt sensing would start to seem to be a matter of personality style. Those who already knew it would get it easily, those who knew it a little would find it with difficulty. Those who knew it hardly at all would have great difficulty ever finding it, especially in focusing partnership where they were guiding themselves. Explanations that those without access were cut off from experience in their childhood were dubious to me from my experience.

On the other hand, when someone had access to felt sensing, the change process that focusing describes would happen, it would be so glorious both in teaching or as a psychotherapist. Access to felt sensing would seem to be the whole question when it comes to success with focusing.

Reading Mary Hendricks' article on focusing research, I like very much the paragraph near the beginning where researchers Gendlin and Zimring were dismayed to find that level of experiencing (focusing capacity) did not improve with psychotherapy even though it was very predictive of success in psychotherapy.

Focusing was developed to address this problem so that people could learn to improve their access to their experiencing.

What a theoretical / practical challenge then if we discover that focusing training and focusing oriented psychotherapy do not have much success changing one's level of experiencing (capacity for focusing), one's access to felt sensing.

So, being able to teach felt sensing not only to those who naturally have it but also to those who only have it a little and to those who naturally don't have it, is quite the big deal on many levels.

This article outlines a whole series of adaptations to address this challenge of **when a felt sense does not form**.

First, we need to backup and clarify certain things. I do not know for sure, ever, that felt sensing is not happening. It is very possible that it is happening and that the person does not recognize it as such and that it is not so visible. Also depending on how you think of felt sensing, it can be more a natural process present everywhere or a special process for conscious focusing.

I want my students and clients to find a way of felt sensing that is visible to those who know this process. Felt sensing has its clearest visibility in a special tentative almost halted rhythm of talking at an unknowing edge. This checking as we go, this referring to something unclear is the clearest indicator that felt sensing is visible.

1. **Distinguishing Felt Sensing from Regular Talking** I teach my students to change chairs as they listen to a focuser when felt sensing becomes visible. I am really working on their getting the difference between stories or regular conversation **and** explicit felt sensing. When they can recognize and distinguish this process as a listener they can do the same as a focuser. It is a problem in focusing training when felt sensing is not distinguished from regular talking.

I know a coordinator for the Focusing Institute who trains psychotherapists. The whole program is oriented only around really getting the focusing/felt sensing process. The thought is, if they get that, they can derive what they need in its use in psychotherapy. I applaud this clarity only I am still struck by the challenge to “really get it”.

2. **The Anti-Shame Project.** When I suggest to a person that they look inside their body for something and they look and nothing is there, they often feel a sense of shame. This can complicate the teaching process. For this and other reasons, at the beginning I present the felt sense as having 3 possibilities 1) it forms and stays as a referent, 2) it flickers meaning it comes and it disappears, 3) it doesn't form. These possibilities are actually part of focusing at all levels. Therefore it is not shameful or a failure if you only have one or two of these. Learning how to work with each is part of learning focusing. Gendlin's conception of felt sensing in A Process Model is very helpful in the anti-shame project. In the last chapter there is a paragraph Holding and Letting. Here, felt sensing is presented as a process and in the notes as a holding and waiting. You hold a situation and you wait for something to form. It sometimes does form; you cannot force it to form. Everybody (or practically everybody) can Hold and Wait. It is now perhaps the critical juncture in my focusing teaching or focusing therapy when I say, “Maybe you want to hold that situation and wait (10-15 seconds) for something to form, OR NOT.”

I use 10-15 seconds as that is already very unusual and yet you don't have to be a trained meditator to wait that long.

“Please notice if something formed or not after that time.”

People with very low access to their felt sense seem to be able to find felt sensing if they can have the discipline to hold and wait like this 5 or 6 times every focusing session that they have.

(Note: You can start with finding a felt sense and then look for the situation connected to it if you don't already know it. I let beginners know this is an option but I emphasize the other direction of finding an issue or situation and then getting a felt sense of that.)

3. **Bad Guessing Method**

When “nothing” forms after 15 seconds, I have another process I use--the **Bad Guessing Method**. I inform the student or client that I am going to try and **guess badly how they are feeling inside** as a way to help them find this elusive thing.

If they seem “mournful” I would **bad-guess** “gleeful” or “cheery” or my favorite – “Do you have a ‘zipitty-do-da’ feeling inside?” Quite remarkably the person with ‘nothing’ inside knowingly says: No, I don't feel “gleeful” inside.

It is almost like my language of “body” has dissociated them from “feeling” or experiencing and now, using something more familiar, they can see that inside their body they don’t feel the “gleeful”.

As a rule I try and **bad-guess** initially in the “emotional” dimension in a very general way. Then I try and **bad-guess** in the physical dimension with a more physical or kinesthetic word. If they seem “jumpy” I might bad-guess ‘calm’, ‘serene’, or ‘smooth’. If they seem ‘heavy’, I might **bad-guess** ‘light’. This **bad guessing** in the physical dimension is a little harder than in the emotional.

The emotional. You can often **bad-guess** an emotional word logically just from the nature of the situation they are exploring. I.E. If they are exploring the death of a parent and the tone of their voice is down, I can figure that ‘gleeful’ is a pretty good **bad-guess**.

Kinesthetic words or texture is not as easy to **bad-guess**. Usually I try to get a felt sense of their felt sense and go opposite of that for my **bad-guessing**. What is nice here is that a **bad-guess** that is “mistakenly right” can then help you make a better **bad-guess** that is not “right”. If I **bad-guess** “foggy” and the person says “yes, that fits” then I would **bad-guess** “solid” (as an opposite of “foggy”). I am not satisfied if a person uses my word because I find that the result for them is much less.

After 2 **bad-guesses** that generate a no, I usually spontaneously get a word from them that “represents”, symbolizes, matches, their felt sense. They also can check that “handle” as the felt sense now stays present. Their rhythm and checking and the nature of their language (unique/specific, versus general/trite) all fit with felt sensing. Often it is like they couldn’t find the radio station before –all that came was meaningless static. Now, with the help of my bad-guessing from 2 different dimensions they are finding their experiencing.

I have a high success rate with this method with people who are not focusing naturally –people who have little, some, or great difficulty finding their felt sense.

I am now working with people learning this as a self-guiding method in the role of focusing partnership.

It might be helpful to tell the story of the origin of this method. I had clients that even after hundreds of invitations, could not find a felt sense. Yet they seemed to be in a state of something to me. I tried guessing their felt sense and they usually said “yes” I feel tired; and if I said heavy tired, they would say “yes”. But then not much would happen. I concluded it is usually NOT helpful to have someone else symbolize well your felt sense. It is the act of your exploring, and naming that creates movement. So then I discovered bad guessing and eventually the sequence of first bad guessing with a “sort of emotional” word and then bad guessing with a “sort of physical/kinesthetic” word. If your bad-guess turns out to be a good guess –which sometimes happens, just take a moment to honor that process and to recover and then use that information to bad-guess better. If I bad-guess “gleeful” and they say “yes”, then I explain that it is good to know that but we need to find their word and check it so if they can find that already,

fine, if not, I might then guess “gloomy” (as an opposite to gleeful). And I always frame it as how they are inside their body; i.e. does this fit with how you are inside.

Self-empathy

I have a theory that some self-empathy, some openness toward your self-in-a-situation is necessary for a felt sense to form. Self empathy implies felt sensing. Felt sensing implies self-empathy. When felt sensing is stuck or not forming you can work with self-empathy.

I am not looking for profound self-compassion; I am not looking to locate something. I’m simply looking for any “break” you can give yourself. I use words like “can you be kind to yourself in this situation, can you be gentle, can you be accepting, understanding, soft, curious, interested, friendly. I emphasize that the answer “No” is very useful so it is a checking not an insistence. If someone gets all “no’s”, I then have a very special question: “can you appreciate the difficulty of changing a situation/problem/issue when you cannot be accepting, curious, gentle, easy (I use here the same words I have checked and gotten “no’s” to) with yourself-in-that-situation? I have a high rate of yes here and I consider that an opening to self-empathy.

So self-empathy is another route toward supporting felt sensing. I give it a domain, a separate chair for listening in my teaching model.

Choosing the situation.

The way we define a situation, the way we try to go into it affects the accessibility of the felt sense. Is it ok to go into this now? Do I need to refine the issue in order to find the felt sense?

For example, I want to work in finding a partner may not generate a felt sense as well as something more specific: “I want to work on finding a life partner and its relation to money” or generating a felt sense may come with something more general like: “what about me and partnership in general- not just romantic partnerships”.

Personality structure.

I have a theory that every person will have a conflict with felt sensing in their structure or character. One way to explore changing character is to explore your blocks to the felt sensing process. The other side of this theory is that for some people the conflict between character and felt sensing comes right at the formation of the felt sense.

For example, a client told me “that her whole life was dedicated to avoiding listening to herself”. Small wonder that formation of a felt sense was very complicated! How do you “hold and wait” if you use “avoiding listening to yourself” as a fundamental principle of your life.

I find it very helpful to appreciate that a person with great difficulty finding a felt sense, may have their character conflict at this point in the process. And it is very helpful in maintaining my regard to realize that everyone has a conflict somewhere.

It is like all placentas are attached to the womb somewhere but a few are attached near the cervix so that the dilation of the cervix starts the detaching prematurely. Before modern science and C-sections these births would be disastrous.

I find “naming the dilemma” in personality structure very helpful, a very important step. How can you hold and wait if you are dedicated to avoiding listening. Naming that dilemma is not the end of the discussion; it is the beginning of exploration of creative solution.

For example, someone does not want to explore “panic” because they are afraid that it will trigger a “panic attack”. This can be considered a great “naming of the dilemma”. I appreciate that step a lot. After recognizing and appreciating that step can come a creative question. This question may come immediately after the naming of the dilemma or a year later – it depends. “Is there a way to explore ‘panic’ without being afraid that it will trigger a ‘panic attack’”? Or, “is there a way to explore ‘panic’ without it triggering a ‘panic attack’”? This is a question the focuser asks oneself. It is something they hold and wait with? Even if nothing forms there is usually curiosity and satisfaction in asking so well. Even if nothing forms, often ideas come that in fact fit.

These conceptions/methods form the core to the approach to “when a felt sense does not form”. Finding effective ways to teach everyone is no small question, it is critical to the very origin of focusing as a process possible to teach.

I. **Distinguishing Felt Sensing from Regular Talking**

The Domain Focusing model and changing chairs as a listener helps with this distinguishing.

II. **Anti-Shame Project**

Disarming the shame of looking for but not finding a felt sense, with:

A. Conceptualizing felt sensing as involving a) not forming, b) flickering, c) forming and staying (the latter is the classic idea) at every focusing level. Learning ways of working with each of these is consequently important.

B. Conceiving of felt sensing as a holding and waiting where sometimes something forms and sometimes it does not and you cannot FORCE it to form.

The discipline of holding and waiting is something everyone can learn.

III. **Help from the bad-guessing method**

Using the bad-guessing method has great success. First, you use bad-guessing in the direction of an emotional word to generate a “No” and then you use bad guessing in the direction of a kinesthetic word to generate another “No”. Usually this sequence leads to a spontaneous handle and recognition of the felt sense formation by the focuser. It is helpful to keep a record of this process as some people forget the formation and need to revisit the place to have an “oh that!” recognition of felt sensing. With a record of the trail you can usually lead someone back to the experiencing.

IV. **Help from exploring self-empathy**

Self empathy for self-in-a-situation and felt sense formation are mutually implying of each other. There is a series of self-guiding self-empathy questions for when the felt sense formation is stuck.

V. Help from exploring the situation further

Refining the situation to make it more specific or more general or more safe can help the felt sense formation process.

VI. Help from understanding character and felt sensing conflict

Understanding that everyone has some conflict between character and felt sensing but with some people this comes right at the beginning point, is very helpful. In this case naming the conflict, *naming the dilemma*, is a very important step that deserves recognition and appreciation.

After “naming the dilemma” can come the creative question: “Is there a way to do X_____ without Y_____?” This is a great question for holding and waiting.

In all of the discussion of felt sensing it is helpful to know that we can think of felt sensing in ways that are natural to everyone and always present and we can think of it in the more specific way of explicitly referencing and exploring it in a moment. This latter way is very central in focusing teaching. In this specific felt sensing, it is helpful to realize as a teacher or guide that one cannot know for sure that felt sensing is NOT being explored by the student or client. We can use the indicators of a) pausing, b) checking with a halting rhythm, c) unique/specific vs. general/trite language, and d) “sort of bodily location” as ways of confirming felt sensing. It is helpful to learn to recognize these indicators both as listener and focuser in the focusing process.

While these approaches are part of a whole self-cohering approach to felt sense formation, they can be used individually as helpful teachings.