

Focusing with Difficult Feelings: The Safety Protocol (a Domain Focusing Product)

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Domain Focusing articulates Focusing as a crossing of 3 logics. These logics can also be thought of as modalities, or functions. The logics in a gross sense are 1. thinking, 2. subtle feeling/knowing/felt sensing/experiencing, 3. beingness/self empathy. All the logics are functioning within each domain/logic/modality/function but one is dominant. Understanding which is dominant makes quite a bit of difference.

In the thinking domain there is great capacity for identifying an issue or a situation or a challenge or a dilemma or an inspiration or a vision or a theory or an innovation. The creative defining within the thinking modality is rather impressive.

But the thinking and narrative and defining are more the early and beginning uses of the thinking function. Later there is entry into implicit intricacy through thinking (see TAE), there is the working with shifting, there is the insight and new possibilities coming from and confirming shifting, there is the search for the right action as implied by the shift.

The thinking domain also has links to executive functioning and to ego in the positive, psychological sense as well as to ego in the spiritual obstaculating sense—not so positive. The thinking domain is a familiar place for decisionmaking, narrative, and expressiveness of all kinds. The latter—expressiveness—is not typically included in the thinking sphere so it needs emphasis. Shouting, crying, exuberant expression are familiar ways of functioning. They are not usually reliant on subtle feeling/knowing but on gross not so dimensional feeling/emoting/knowing.

The feeling logic is really the felt sensing domain. It is a subtle feeling/knowing not the familiar meaning of feelings as sad, angry, fearful, joyous, It is a place where the subtle feeling is entered and explored through various avenues. It can also be called a body sense. There is great subtlety in skill in finding a felt sense exactly in relation to what you want to explore. (Issue→Felt Sense or Issue crossing into Felt sense.) There is also great skill and subtlety in going the other way. . . .of beginning with an odd or hard to articulate feeling and slowly coming to discover what it is about in one's life. (Felt Sense→Issue or Felt Sense crossing into Issue.)

For example a gross feeling like that of being sick or in pain, may take months to differentiate and to find a felt sense and more months to finding the meaning it is pointing to in one's life. Another gross sense might be called numbed-out-metabolism- slowed-depression (I like "discouragement" better since it doesn't confuse the issue with positions in psychology about "depression" , but many people kind of know what "numbed-out- metabolism-slowed-depression is.) So it can take years to be able to differentiate a felt sense out of the loud insistent pervasive depression feel, and then more years to sort out "what it is about" in one's

life, and more years to sort out what action steps to take. Well we would want it to be months rather than years and sometimes it can be.

Well it can take some years to develop a habit of entering and checking and finding felt sense in these two different directions (Issue → Felt Sense, Felt Sense → Issue). Of course there needs to be equal work on knowing how to work with it toward getting a felt sense shift. Most of the skill of working in this felt sensing domain is practice based.

The differentiation of these two modalities of thinking and felt sensing is in Gendlin's thinking but it isn't where he has centered himself. It isn't exactly a central theme. He has articulated a logic of experiencing and that it is different from the logic of thinking. He has not highlighted focusing as a crossing of these two logics.

The third logic/domain/function/modality in domain focusing is beingness/self empathy. It is particularly about having sufficient self-empathy for the crossing of the other two logics to go on. But it turns out, that when this domain/logic/modality/function gets differentiated, it really opens things up. Thinking and beingness can cross like thinking and felt sensing, so it is an alternate route when that first crossing between the logics of thinking and experiencing is blocked.

Moreover, beingness/self empathy and felt sensing logics/domains/functions/modalities can also cross. Beingness provides the goodness and the character which felt sensing can be lacking. Beingness turns out to be the most important function in dealing with severe experiences. Severe experiences (difficult feeling) like major depression, addiction (12 steps' higher power is seen as a beingness move), disintegration anxiety, dissociation often do not respond to the logic of felt sensing. Felt sensing cannot do its job with these heavier issues until the ground has been much more prepared and beingness logic (wisdom, empathy, compassion, love, presence) is the key to getting somewhere with those and to preparing the ground for felt sensing.

All this is background for describing the "Is there a way Safety Protocol". For the protocol, most of what needs to be learned needs also extensive practice. This is not at all "plug and play". It is not like a blender that you plug in and it is ready to roll. Quite the contrary, there are many subtleties which will defeat you often in the early going. Once you learn to function with these subtleties, these methods can become highly reliable for you. You cannot learn to play the piano by just reading about it.

The method is a Domain Focusing product. It is based in someone differentiating these 3 logics/modalities for themselves and knowing how to enter through each domain, knowing how to cross between domains, and having some understanding of phases in the process: starting → entering → shifting → acting. And that process needs community and support to sustain. . . . it isn't just a mechanical individual doing.

Domain Focusing is slower to learn than other Focusing styles. If you are trying to adapt this method to other Focusing styles there are usually several adjustments you will need to make if you want to get the full power. For example, DF makes sustaining a sense of whole self quite important. It also resists breaking into part-selves if conflicting sides of self can form a felt sense without that division. When you do divide into parts we like to language it in the form of: “you in your vulnerable part” so that we keep that whole self explicitly in the ball game.

If you decide to embark on learning Domain Focusing in its own terms so that you have the functions differentiated within you, the power of the method will be fuller. Of course I hope you do that.

Focusing with Difficult Feelings

With difficult feelings or problems like rage, obsession, addiction, anxiety, grief, depression, dissociation, disorientation, trauma, lovesickness, and social isolation (and many more “heavies”), it can be very hard to do focusing. The feelings are too intense, too frozen, too expunged, too tsunamic. With difficult feelings, rather than getting a felt sense of the whole of the situation in a way, from outside the situation, you get a feeling of the intensity of the situation—a possible entry to felt sensing but not necessarily a felt sense (a feeling of the whole). The intensity or strength of the feeling overwhelms what little felt sense is there.

For example, rather than getting a whole sense of the big bad depression (a whole sense would necessarily bring hope no matter how faint), you feel the spreading devouring all encompassing intensity of the depression and just feel more depressed. Rather than feeling the whole of your issue with anxiety which is, by definition, “more than” the anxiety, and which, by definition, brings the promise of a way forward, you only feel accelerating debilitating anxiety. This is NOT felt sensing, but it can be quite challenging to make the distinction.

It is challenging because entry into the intensity CAN be a route into felt sensing, a preparation for felt sensing. However, the intensity can dominate and then rather than getting to felt sensing you just get into the hopelessness of the anxiety for example.

Many Focusing styles do NOT emphasize the distinction of felt sense from feeling. They mention it but then Focusing in practice comes back under the category of getting in touch with your feelings. “Getting in touch with your feelings” is a tremendous movement, and it is important in some way to all growth practices. And the Focusing styles which differentiate less there are still incredibly valuable. For Domain Focusing the differentiation of finding a felt sense from “getting in touch with your feelings” is really quite important. You may need to work much more on this aspect so that you have “what I mean here” in your body.

“Obsessive-compulsive” tendencies are another good example. If you are working on a kind of compelling non-productive repetitive circle of thinking/feeling, the effort to enter felt sensing may easily just trigger the compelling non-productive repetitive circling rather than triggering the way forward (characteristic of felt sensing).

In Domain Focusing, a felt sense is always tentatively a felt sense until it shifts and brings insight and new possibilities confirming the shift. Until the process has completed everything is tentative. Of course we have many ways to tentatively confirm felt sensing along the way.

One method for checking if you are indeed felt sensing, is to consider how familiar the feeling you are exploring, is. If it is exactly the problem you have, if your exploration of depression brings a depressive feeling, it may confirm you are indeed exploring your depression, but it also confirms you are not yet in the area of true felt sensing. True felt sensing, is always characterized by having “more than” what you know, in it. If the feeling is only what you know, you are not yet in felt sensing territory. Moreover, you may not make it into felt sensing territory, because difficult feelings by definition, tend to trap us.

The solution is a special series of Self Empathy (SE) moves which take particular account of this tendency to get trapped in the feeling. Self Empathy is one of three domains in Domain Focusing, my teaching model. See the Self-Guiding Domain Focusing Form – (also attached).

Partnership vs Professional Guiding in Domain Focusing

Domain Focusing elaborates 15 different kinds of listening coming from the 3 domains and the 5 phases (3X5=15). Moreover, we see the egalitarian and free nature of focusing partnership as being very important to distinguish from helping/consultative/practitioner work. A way to make that distinction and also a way to protect partnership and egalitarianism, is to discourage suggestions initiated by the listener in partnership and to encourage self-suggestions by the Focuser or requests for help initiated ONLY by the Focuser. This gives more safety to egalitarian Focusing Partnership.

Partnership training in Domain Focusing involves 12 major goals.

- 1) ability as Focuser to initiate a move into felt sensing and to find a felt sense
- 2) ability as Focuser to initiate the crossing into another logic
- 3) ability of listener to reflect within the terms of the focuser
- 4) ability of listener to surrender the need to help or to fix and specifically to surrender initiation of help
- 5) ability as Focuser to enter Felt Sense early in a session and to spend half the session there both to maximize outcome and to build rapport with partner.
- 5) ability as Focuser to enter implicit intricacy through each domain/logic/function/modality
- 6) ability as Focuser to come to shifting and to allow that process to fill out
- 7/) ability as Focuser to find action steps out of the new possibilities
- 8) ability of listener to recognize, follow and support the crossing into other logics
- 9) ability of listener to recognize, follow and support the entry into each logic especially felt sensing.
- 10) ability of listener to recognize and support shifting
- 11) ability of listener to recognize, follow and support acting into the situation
- 13) ability of listener to vary listening—short, medium, long;. . . .most recent, elsewhere in current segment, earlier in session; rethreading the whole session;

14) ability of listener to experience the reflection process as a bridging to the focuser's experiencing such that their experience is attuning to that of the Focuser

12) ability to navigate the art of partnership. The art of partnership involves ability to have productive exchange with people of diverse age, diverse education, diverse ethnicity, diverse class, diverse gender and diverse orientations. To have productive exchanges with people with whom you have little obvious rapport, little in common. Being on time, recovering from a missed session, responsibility, entering FS early in one's session and entering implicit intricacy in other domains early in one's session as ways to build confidence in the partnership, are all part of the art of partnership.

Domain Focusing in the initial 1-2 years has more boundaries by a listener in partnership than any other focusing style I know. This includes the limitation of process suggestions like "maybe you want to stay with that". That is partly because DF gives more freedom to guide as a practitioner than any other style so someone must be great at following and at listening in partnership or they cannot learn to guide in this system. Each guiding suggestion in DF comes out of a new implying generated by an authentic reflection. It is also because listening without any need to fix or help is one of the skills requiring the longest most sustained amount of practice. It is also for having the happy differentiation between egalitarian and practitioner. It also is for safety in an egalitarian setting.

Self Empathy MOVES for Difficult Feelings

Beginning the "Is there a way" safety protocol

Is it ok?

1. "Is it ok to be exploring ____? (____ = this issue, or this anxiety, or this feeling, this felt sense or this kind of self-empathy or opening). Note that people in oppressive contexts sometimes report growth work as being counter-productive because it opens them when they need to be more defended. Other times people in these contexts report great value from Focusing and the opening it brings.

A. Triggers for "is it ok":

- a. Diagnoses/Systemic mental health disorders: Depression, Intense Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive, Trauma—dissociation, Rage, Terror, Lovesickness, Fragile Self, Social Isolation, bipolar, complicated bereavement, suicidality, homicidality, out of consensual reality and more.
Recognition of these and many other intense frozen wholes. . . in subtle ways. . . is a major accomplishment.
- b. Crossing of somatic boundaries---headache, sweaty palms, accelerating heart beat, nausea, urge to excrete, heat, pulsing, itching
Recognizing the crossing of somatic boundaries also takes quite a bit of practice. People can get the idea from reading but learning to notice/perceive/recognize it in practice is much more. This is true both for Focuser in partnership and for Practitioner in a professional setting. Achieving good listening in Focusing

Partnership often requires 1.5-2 years of active study in Domain Focusing. Guiding also requires another 2-3 years of sustained study for functioning as a practitioner.

Crossing somatic boundaries toward the physical is usually NOT the direction we want to work in. We want to access physicality more experientially so we can impact it more easily. Experiencing is sort of like software; physicality sort of like hardware. We want to be in the software where things can be impacted. If you are getting a sudden headache from exploring experience and issues, then it is important to consider it as a warning and to take it seriously.

c. FS reported in the extremities

Extremities include feet, calves, thighs, head, face, arms, hands. The torso and the center of the torso—stomach, diaphragm, chest are especially able to be incredibly subtle in felt sensing. (whole self/whole body can also be very subtle.) Neck and lower abdomen are not quite as easy for subtlety. Genitals and excretory areas embedded with them, are generally unreported and we haven't really learned how to work there so well so that's almost a whole other thing. Felt sense in the extremities may NOT signal difficult feelings. It signals difficult feelings often enough that it is worth checking and using the protocol, especially if you know there are other indications of "difficult feelings".

One notion of classic "trauma" is that the psyche splits the experience into isolated parts as a way to protect the self. So if trauma is being reactivated through your focusing work, then getting a felt sense of the whole in a classic way, in the torso, does not work. So getting the felt sense away from the torso may be a signal if this is the case. The "is it ok" and the later "is there a way. . . . without. . . . with. . . ." is addressing the kind of blocking or enforced splitting from trauma in many big problems.

In the old days of focusing, we learned to ask a client or student to bring the FS reported in the extremities, into the torso, and especially to the stomach-chest region. If you have ever had an explosion from this old way, you learn to be much more careful. "Is it ok" is a way of being much more careful.

d. Disturbing Contexts

Living in or trapped in intense environments like prisons, mental health hospitals, war zones, homeless shelters, poverty or poverty threats, threats to

sufficient food, water, shelter and without basic medicine, clean air can be a big factor in safety. It can include living in a very disturbing family environment, a very depressive couple relationship, a cult like community, or even trapped in a disturbing helping relationship. Sometimes larger groups (a country even) can develop cult like characteristics.

In these extreme contexts, we can ask, "Given this extreme context, is it ok to be exploring _____?" (focusing, growth, an issue, a Felt sense, a way of empathy)

B. Responses to "is it ok"

a. Absolute No

I can sometimes work with this method a hundred times without encountering an "absolute No". When it does happen you need to recognize it. I have only found a feeling inside to really point to this absoluteness. Sometimes an absolute no is in the strength of the voice or the certainty of the no, but other times it is more subtle. You want to be ready for an absolute no, when you as Focuser or you as Practitioner ask "is it ok. . . . ". If you are really ready for an absolute no, you will get a sense about it if it is present and you can ask further questions to check it.

When there is an "absolute no", it may be that the whole focusing session needs to stop "on a dime". Now. Immediately. Do not pass "Go" go directly to stopping.

Other times, a direct NO is a direct NO to exploring that particular issue or that particular felt sense. Then the challenge is to find another issue or felt sense. I have a method called "sliding" if you want to find an issue which is related but safe. When people work on deep change, which I call macroshifting, and they find an "absolute no", they don't want to drop the whole macroshifting project. So "sliding" enables the work to continue on the macro but in a different issue.

But an intense absolute NO even in macroshifting may imply "stop everything" related to focusing for now. There will come another time.

In working with absolute no's, it is important to understand that there are HUGE BENEFITS to honoring an "absolute no". When you honor a deep down "absolute no" you are establishing a relationship with that deep down territory. This is true whether you are guide or focuser. There is great potential establishment of trust by recognizing an "absolute no".

- b. Fuzzy no, Maybe, fuzzy yes → Is there a way . . . ? protocol

This is described in C. below and it is the big moving force in this protocol. But you have to come to it in this careful way of the open question “is it ok” and the willingness to honor an “absolute no”. Sometimes you (partnership) or you (practitioner) get a NO response, but it doesn’t seem absolute. You might ask (yourself-partnership, or your client-practitioner format), “is it ok to explore ways that would be safe?” or “is it ok to look for a way to explore which would also be safe”. Getting no’s to these questions will lead you back to a confirmation that there is an “absolute no”.

The fuzzy no or fuzzy yes, and the maybe yes, maybe no in response to “is it ok to explore ____?” is a quite productive fertile place. Once we understand the “safety protocol” it is great to arrive at this response. In my macroshifting work, I teach that this way in, is a direct staircase to the macro level and I have people look for things to explore which are on the edge of being ok or not so they can learn to use this method for this access to the deep.

- c. Yes If the answer to the question “is it ok to explore ____?” is yes, then continue if it feels alright to continue. Now we need to get into whether this process is being used in an egalitarian setting like focusing partnership or whether it is being used in a professional helping situation.

If the setting is a partnership, all these questions are asked by the Focuser. Of course the Focuser is encouraged to ask for help. . . then the listener can help after the Focuser initiates getting help.

As a practitioner we would check if the “yes” also feels right and ok to us. Sometimes people take the “is it ok” question as a suggestion and feel compelled to say “yes”. They usually answer quite quickly when that is happening. So you might want to gently ask them to consider the question more slowly and carefully if you are in that role.

You are in a dual take situation. The Focuser’s sense of their experience rules, but, as a practitioner, you also need to follow your sense in this protocol to some degree. It needs to be ok with both of you in a funny way even though the Focuser’s sense rules ultimately. It is quite important to learn how to hold this dual take situation such that the Focuser doesn’t feel imposed upon.

For example, I might say, “I understand it is ok for you to continue, and I certainly want to do that, but something in me isn’t quite ready to keep going. . . . can you bear with me while I catch up. . . .long pause. I think it might help me to go over that last question again. So I’m going to ask it, and can you just hold it, no response until I signal, and really kind of drink the question into your gut.

I have sometimes used this “is it ok to be exploring ____ (issue or FS) 20 or more times in a session. And the client has always responded “yes. I have occasionally asked at the end if it bothered them and I have never had someone say that it did bother them. That surprised me. Instead they tend to say that they felt like I was really taking care of them.

- C. Is there a way ? protocol. This is an expansion of the maybe so , maybe not ok to explore.
 - a. What is the potential problem if we explore? Get some specificity. What could happen (be problematic) if you explore? In a partnership you are asking yourself as Focuser, as a practitioner you are asking the client.

So here is an example of an instance. A person confessed at the end of her first year of training that she avoided partnership practice because she would feel more depressed afterwards and then she couldn’t study for her academic program, afterwards. [This isn’t supposed to happen in partnership but it did.] The not being able to study afterwards is a good example of specificity. Is there a way to explore _____(issue) and still be able to study afterwards? Is there a way to explore _____ (issue or FS) without getting more depressed?

Feeling depressed or bad or sad are all good articulations but they are still fairly general. . . . the not being able to study is more specific and works a little or a lot better.

By the way this person changed her whole experience of focusing with this method and reported that she overcame lifelong chronic depression with her 2.5 years in the training program.

- b. Make an “Is there a way” question. Is there a way to explore X without ending up feeling depressed for the rest of the day (the problem)? Is there a way to

explore X and still maintain your tranquility which is so important (another kind of statement of the problem)?

It takes time and practice to find just the right question. You need to keep working on it until your felt sense feels right about the question. Again, as the Focuser in a partnership you just do the best you can. It is good to ask for help occasionally or a lot. It is hard to remember directions if you go quite deep so in DF the listener cannot initiate help so if you the Focuser don't ask for it, you don't get help except in exquisite listening.

- c. A long pause after this special question is very good. It is like the computer doing a long complicated search, it takes time. This phenomenon of the focuser slowing way down makes the eventual response much more reliable. If a way comes, after a long pause, you can follow that with tentative confidence. It has high reliability (80-90%) but it requires being active on the side of protecting against the danger AND continuing to use the "is it ok" if triggers come. Remember as focuser (partnership) or Practitioner (guiding a client) it is surprisingly comforting for someone in this situation to hear this "is it ok" question many times even when they repeatedly answer "yes". Some people do not have the long pause. That may mean it did not work. As a listener you just follow. As a practitioner you can coach them to go back and say the question and then as practitioner say it back to them and instruct them to really wait and see if it naturally just goes in and pauses things.
- D. Specific diagnoses and how specific responses/knowledges are helpful. Depression, Anxiety, OCD, dissociation, rage, terror each have specific places where focusing can help.

If you work enough with a particular kind of problem or diagnosis, you realize you are going to need to use this protocol often with a person. (Practitioner). If you are a Focuser and you know your diagnosis sotospeak or some notion of your deeper problem in some system of thinking, you may realize you will probably use this protocol a lot. In macroshifting,(deep change) you learn to look for ways to use this protocol as it is quite productive.

Parenting Macros: when a child has a problem from the parent's perspective, the parent wants to help the child. Often the child or the young adult, has another slant on things. For a parenting macro to function, I know that I have to spend a lot of time developing a macro definition which includes both people and their notions. For people who have had a bipolar episode, I notice that a good focusing session

might trigger a mild or even large manic response. So I use something like “Is there a way to be in touch with the felt sense without getting a high or manic response?”

With anxiety looping in a closed circle, I find that it is helpful to block the process, to stop the circling and insist on only staying with the whole anxiety system not with a particular anxiety place. This is insufficiently explained but you get the idea.

As a practitioner, if you notice something which signals a complicated diagnosis you may want to initiate the “is there a way protocol?” And that protocol may lead to new protocols you develop for that person and that problem.

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