

The Essential Role of Self-Empathy in Focusing Draft 11/97

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I want to posit that self-empathy and a felt sense that can be related to and symbolized, articulated by word, gesture, image, sound, are two ends of the same see-saw.

One of the ongoing problems of teaching focusing is the person who has great difficulty recognizing or acknowledging or relating to a felt sense. Moreover, even people who do know how to get a felt sense may have difficulty getting a felt sense in relation to a particular issue. Moreover, even people who can get a felt sense with a particular issue, may not be able to allow it to emerge to the place where it is moving through steps (Not Gendlin's "6-steps" but the little changes that a felt sense goes through) and eventually, a qualitative change. Understanding the role of self-empathy and its intrinsic relationship to the felt sense, even it being part of one "self-empathy>>felt sense" process can help with these problems. Moreover, self-empathy has the potential to add elegance to the focusing process by linking many strategies to one idea. In addition it adds strategies that were hitherto unthinkable or difficult to think.

I want to elaborate on self-empathy theoretically, in practice, and in new practices.

What I am calling "self-empathy" is not new, the way I am thinking about it and what that adds is perhaps a bit new. Cornell's emphasis on saying "Hello" to the felt sense--Can you say hello to it? is in my understanding a way of pointing to the importance of self-empathy. Without any pressure she asks this question, as interested in the negative answer as the positive. The 'No, I'm not ready' is taken very seriously and a new "issue" is looked for which might be ready and it is found with the question, "What stops you or blocks you from saying Hello", can we make that the new issue and say Hello to that. No can say Hello, no ready to go deeper into focusing.

Gendlin emphasizes the contamination that an inner critic brings to the focusing process. The focusing pauses while the critic is humored, attacked, sideswiped, mocked, persuaded to back up and make room. From the perspective I am developing here, self-empathy is destroyed by the critic and until the self-empathy is restored, the work with the felt sense stops. Gendlin's ways of working with the critic, pushing it back, does indeed make room for the self-empathy to return and for the process to continue, even though he does not explicate this side of the critic work (returning to self-empathy) so much.

Campbell & McMahan (Biospirituality) emphasize checking with an issue or felt sense to see if it is ok to work with it. I am suggesting that this step essentially checks to see if the person has enough empathy right now for this issue or place or felt sense that he/she can work with it. If the person does not have the self-empathy now for that, then they will usually say no, it is not ok. Of course many times something emerges that requires more empathy and then they check again, is it ok, and if the empathy is not enough the person usually says no and the process can keep growing.

In observing Mary McGuire & Janet Klein (former Directors of the Focusing Institute) I saw them using the words, "curious", "friendly", "welcoming" in a way to check for what I am calling "self-empathy". 'Can you be welcoming to that which has come', can you be friendly to it, can you be curious about it. Sometimes they seemed to be using these questions in a hierarchical way, and I certainly sometimes do that. Then, 'welcoming' is showing lots of empathy, 'curious' is showing minimal empathy, and 'friendly' is somewhere in between. In fact, not only is this special approach very helpful to new focusers, but it is quite powerful for experienced focusers to notice what they can only be

curious about, and to take time to move toward being friendly or even welcoming to it. For experienced focusers just this movement from 'curious' through 'friendly' to 'welcoming' tends to bring surprisingly deep shifts. In my perspective, McGuire & Klein are paying lots of attention to self-empathy in using these questions in this way.

Cornell & Gavin emphasize the importance of the Inner Relationship. By that I think they mean the relationship of "I" or central self to that being experienced, the relationship of the whole to the part. By giving a name to this whole area, and elaborating on it, they seem to be going beyond not only "finding the right distance" as they reference but also beyond the "focusing attitude" --the old label and concept--in a way that opens up new possibilities and new thinking.

I think they are including much of what I am calling self-empathy. But I still do not know their work well enough to be sure. I have decided to retain my labeling because it is still leading me, helping me to unfold things.

Under the general rubric of the 'focusing attitude' there are many instances of questions which are used to help a focuser (when there is guiding) or used by the focuser (when there is just listening) which invite or check for self-empathy. 'Can you be gentle with it (the felt sense)', 'Can you be patient with it', 'can you **be** with it', 'can you stay with it', 'can you be understanding of it', 'can you be compassionate toward it', 'can you be respectful toward it'.

The 'it' does not have to be the felt sense, it can also be the issue. For example, if someone is working on their depression (depression is the "issue") they may ask if they can be gentle with their depression? Initially, people usually cannot be gentle with a depression, they hate it with a passion. Thus, just as with Cornell's use of "hello", I ask what is in the way of their being gentle, they say they hate it, and I ask if we can make that the new issue--their hating it--and does a felt sense come about that.

When I'm teaching a new person for whom "felt sense" does not compute, nor "experiencing", nor "felt meaning", and "feelings" are just the signal that the synapses are working, it is especially helpful that I can work on empathy for the issue because that is our only commonality!

The "it" that we are finding empathy for, can be an inner child or inner parent or inner baby. It can be an archetypal force. Sometimes when experiencing comes, as we start describing or discovering it, we notice that it seems childish, or it is the part of me that wants to be obnoxious, or the part that wants to be recognized, or the part that is critical. It can be helpful to even think of the focusing work as a dialogue with this part, "Ask it what it needs"? And of course the self-empathy work applies to this 'it' as well. "Can you be sensitive to it? Can you be patient with it?"

In the Inner Guide Meditation (Steinbrecher), a Jungian esoteric active imagination journey, one asks the guide to bring an archetype that is about an issue. In one's inner imagery a unique archetypal force manifests in the inner eye and one asks questions to 'it' such as what do I need to do to be your friend, or what do you want from me? Any coming of a force --visual or otherwise --can become the 'it', for which you are developing empathy.

As the empathy develops, it seems that the felt sense can come more easily and move through steps more easily and with more depth.

To summarize thus far, like Cornell & Gavin's Inner Relationship emphasis, I think the whole area of self in relation to felt sense needs to be developed and expanded beyond the critic and the focusing attitude or the spiritual carefulness of biospirituality. I use the term "self empathy" because it helps the unfolding. The first elaboration is that there can be empathy for the issue as well as for the

felt sense or for the sub part or sub force associated with the felt sense. This is helpful for new people with whom the main commonality may be the world of issue, of cognition.

Empathy and felt sense may be part of one bigger process the way two ends of a see-saw are part of the same board. All along when we have gotten felt sense to come it may have been along with an unidentified self-empathy that allowed, created, co-manifested with the felt sense. When, we teachers, ran into stone walls within others or ourselves it may be that there was not enough self-empathy to melt the walls. Moreover, entering the felt sense as focusers do, may automatically invite more self-empathy which is so often manifested with the felt shift. Not only, then, does self-empathy allow for felt sense, growing felt sense, and deeply meaningful felt sense, but entering the felt sense more deeply allows for deeper, more specific, more just right self-empathy so the inner relationship can be healed.

Implications for teaching. Finding the kind of self-empathy that is needed by the felt sense or issue, which is "just right" is not only important, but moving, growth inducing. Rather than suggesting that someone say hello to their issue or felt sense I try and suggest a form of empathy that seems just right for their issue, or to ask them to find the 'just right' empathic stance.

It may help to give this more historical background. When I returned from seeing M. McGuire and J. Klein work, I started using 'curious, friendly, welcoming' as a progression of self-empathy. 'Can I/you be curious about it (the felt sense or issue)', 'can you be friendly toward it?', 'can you be welcoming toward it'. Often that would work. Either I would start to work when someone had an issue or felt sense which they could at least be curious about, or I could work the issue from the empathy end of the see-saw. I.E. if the person could be curious but not friendly, I could suggest they ask what stops them from being friendly, or if they could be friendly but not welcoming, what stops them from being welcoming? As people work from this empathy end they seem to have the same kind of shifts they do when they are resonating the felt sense, entering into and describing it more. Thus I wonder, can we move a felt sense by exploring self-empathy? Is it sometimes an easier more elegant way to work?

Then some of my students and clients didn't like this curious>friendly>welcoming thing. It was too 'canned' for them. Then I began to vary with other self-empathic kinds of words, can you be gentle, can you be patient, can you be accepting, can you be understanding of it? Can you acknowledge it, can you make room for it, can you be with it? Can you stay with it, can you keep it company, can you 'be there' for it, can you sing it a damn lullaby as you hang out with it? Pardon the vernacular, but I began to think of how I would put my baby to sleep as ways to be empathic. And I remember how frustrating it would be when that baby wouldn't go to sleep, and somehow the frustration and the "getting ill" with the process were all a part of my learning to love that baby. Hence, the profane.

Now, of course, I can go two ways at least. Like Cornell and her Hello question, I can always ask what is in the way of being _____ (curious, gentle, patient, fill in the blank) with it, and invite them to make that the new issue/felt sense>>that thing in the way; but I can also explore or ask them to explore what empathic word, what empathic gesture, what empathic posture they could take toward the felt sense/issue>>if you can't be curious, can you be gentle, how about patient, how about benign.

I want to quickly add how important it is to appreciate how hard it can be for a focuser to say "No I can't be curious about it". **The honesty here is essential and it is courageous.** I find that I need to anticipate how hard this can be--"no is just as good an answer as yes", "are you sure". When someone replies, "yes I can probably be gentle, or yes I think I can be kind, or, I can be patient, I think"--I usually take those as probably meaning "no I can't". I ask them to check, can they really be that way with this place?

Interestingly the block to saying hello is not the same as the block to 'acknowledging it', or the same as the block to 'being kind to it'; though working on any of those blocks may all help you to get back to the original issue which may need to be worked on. When I am working, the exploration of other self-empathic possibilities, and the work on what is in the way of being self-empathic (of saying hello) are like possible avenues. When I pause or slow down or get stuck in my guiding or in my work with myself, these become avenues that can come to me to take in a very loose creative way. I may start by exploring other ways of being self-empathic, but at any point I can switch into what is blocking that?

As I claim this way of working, it helps me in those pauses where I don't know what to do (and I'm waiting for a knowing to come). These happen often to me. In fact I think they happen to most focusing teachers. It only seems seamless because they have gotten in and out of not-knowing so often that they don't experience the not-knowing as foreign. In addition, working on self-empathy is helpful when the process is cut off, stuck, too shallow. With a new person to whom the world of experiencing seems strange, it gives the teacher many, many more ways to work. Spending a whole session with someone checking if they can be kind, or gentle or patient with something, is no bad thing. The after effect can be quite powerful.

When I use the exploring other ways of being self-empathic as an approach rather than exploring the issue/felt sense in the way of self-empathic questions like 'can you say hello to it?', and the person is new to focusing or to the self-empathy work, then I need to make it easy for them. Don't put one more foreign concept on them, it could be the straw that breaks the camel's back. So, as I saw this occasionally happening, I wondered how could I make it easier?

I realized that focusing is complicated enough for a new person--do I really want to introduce a whole new concept at that point. Usually I don't but I still need to be able to work with the self-empathy even if I don't introduce it. In this case I just want the person to find a felt sense and to be able to work on it so that it moves. What I have found is that I can stay with my felt sense of their felt sense (even if they haven't found it to label very well yet) or I can try and get a felt sense of their felt sense of their issue. I like the terminology of "getting a felt sense of their felt sense" versus tuning into their felt sense or feeling their felt sense because it implies the **piece** of it that I am getting. The copy of a painting, the tape of a live performance, should not be confused with the thing itself. This is especially true when you barely know someone and you make your copy in a microsecond or a minute.

So I get my felt sense of their felt sense or of their issue without articulated felt sense, and then I ask myself what empathic gesture or posture would be 'just right' or 'good enough' for this place. Sometimes a word comes to me that is 'good enough', 'just right' takes a while longer usually. Gentle and kind do not seem to come as often as I like to use them. 'Can you be **compassionate** with that issue?' 'Can you be **understanding** toward it?' 'Can you be **accepting** toward it?' came more than I expected, so now I try them more often with myself or others. The question for the guide becomes, "What empathic posture would work or help open this felt sense of their felt sense that I am experiencing?" In a small way I am asking what the felt sense needs in order to even be explored. The question: "what does it need?" is usually one question that is reserved until the felt sense has been entered and deepened and explored. Often this question (which is considered a shift question for step 5 in Gendlin's 6-step model of teaching focusing), works in this small way of exploring self-empathy, **at the beginning**. With a new person or a difficult to teach person, the guide sensing what kind of self-empathy is 'good enough' helps the process to unfold smoothly and the new student can return to the felt sense work which is so important.

I am a psychologist and I have a private practice seeing people individually, in couples, in groups, in families. In general I do not teach focusing during a session though I do encourage people to get training from teachers other than myself. I do use implicit focusing many times in a session both with the client and with myself, toward knowing what to do next. Implicit focusing is the subject of another article. In this setting someone staying with a felt sense for 3 seconds could be monumental. In this setting where the relationship is so much the emphasis, focusing tends to happen in segments rather than in turns as with people who know focusing. The self-empathy piece becomes even more helpful here.

In my work in therapy I began taking this work in a further direction. As my depressed clients kept telling me they hate their depression, and anything in any way related to it; as they kept telling me to get off of this namby pamby gentle and kind stuff (yes I do overdo it sometimes) I began to wonder what kind of self-empathy would be accessible to them. I've tried the usual things, the critic things, the stay with things, the curious-friendly-welcoming approach, the other kinds of self-empathy approach, the what kind of self-empathic gesture would be good for them approach, and I still would sometimes hit a wall.

Is there some kind of empathy I was blocked to that would help these people open up the world of their experiencing?, I asked myself. As I listened harder all I would hear is how much they **hate** the depression. Then from several directions at once--a radio show, a newspaper article, in my relationship to some people close to me and previously close to me, I **heard** the theme of connection to the hated. Hate is a connection. And sometimes it can evolve into a growthful connection. I couldn't go so far as to ask, "Can you be hateful toward this depression?" "Could you be murderous toward this depression?" The edge of evil deserves some buffer. But then I clarified it. Can you **empathically** hate your depression? Can you be **empathically hateful** toward your depression? Can you be **empathically angry** toward it? Can you be **empathically murderous** toward it?

By using the word empathically I distinguish between hate and anger and murderous as they can operate to create hurt and pain and the way I am using them. Let me give two more examples here. I want to distinguish between a destructive anger and for example, anger at social injustice which inspires someone to change social structure. The inspiring anger is anger in the service of the greater good.

Another example comes from Eugene Gendlin's book on dreams. A woman had a dream about piglets and a mother pig. Her action energy came from how would a mother pig's actions toward the piglets (firmly but forcefully flicking them away) in the person's problem situation help and indeed they would. >>>Can you be **empathically firm but forceful** like the mother pig with her piglets in your situation?

Empathy has a natural connection with the softness of kind, gentle, patient, loving, accepting. I affirm that and support that and do not want to break that connection. However, that should not lead us to be blind to empathy's firm and even hard sides, to its multi-dimensionality. Empathy is a big, big concept especially in its reference to a range of felt meaning.*

I cannot claim or even suspect that the concept of self-empathy is new outside of focusing. I am not an expert on the literature around empathy. Within the focusing world which I know somewhat better, I am not aware of others using this term. But I am sure that others are familiar with this dimension. I have referenced some of the topics in focusing that are already explicitly pointing in this direction as a way to acknowledge this commonality and to enrich the discussion. My hope is that calling it "self empathy" and elaborating on that could give more people access to this dimension of focusing work. My hope is that it helps people in teaching focusing, and in learning focusing. I especially

hope it helps in the teaching/learning process with people who do not learn focusing easily, and with therapy clients who do not take to focusing easily. My hope is that it will help focusers generally in getting unstuck, and in going deeper. The notions of finding a "good enough" way of having self-empathy, and of finding a "just right" way of having self-empathy, are newer ideas. The notion of accessing empathically hateful, empathically murderous, empathically angry is also newer. I hope that they can contribute to an ever growing ever enriching dialogue.

*The newer concepts around self-empathy are related to work in my dissertation on "neutrality" and to my study of consciousness with Marty Cohen and Rebecca Falk and to the work of George Simon generally.