

WholeBody Focusing

Introductory Manual

Important Note: This manual has been written by a Wholebody Focusing student and is designed to accompany in person/Skype workshop/sessions with a WBF trainer.

There is much of WBF that must be experienced, that cannot be adequately communicated in words. Someone already familiar with Focusing could incorporate much of WBF into the Focusing experience, but to tap into the real riches available working with a trainer/therapist experienced with this modality is recommended.

This manual is designed to be read online rather than printed as it links to various resources available free online to enhance the learnings in the manual.

Wholebody Focusing Introduction

Wholebody Focusing is the product of Kevin McEvenue combining two different modalities he was trained in and has used extensively: Focusing and The Alexander Technique.

Focusing

Over 35 years ago, at the University of Chicago, a psychotherapist and philosopher by the name of Eugene Gendlin was studying what makes therapy successful. Contrary to what he was expecting to find, he was amazed to discover that the answer lay not in something that the therapist did, but rather was a skill that the client did or didn't have. Gendlin found that he was able to predict whether or not a series of therapy sessions would be successful simply by listening to a recording of the first two sessions with a client. When he went back and checked what he had discovered against his own practice, he found that contrary to what he had believed, those of his clients who were successful all had the skill to start with and simply became better at tapping into it as the sessions went by. Those clients who didn't have the skill continued to flounder and not get the answers they needed to resolve their issues, no matter how many sessions he had with them.

So what is this skill that makes all the difference? Gendlin found that those who were successful in therapy at various times stopped talking and appeared to be going inward, searching for the right word to use to describe a sense of something inside. He discovered that it was a process that went on inside of them that made all the difference and later went on to study the process to the point of being able to develop teachable steps so that everyone can learn it. He called the skill Focusing, and there is now a worldwide Focusing movement with people from all walks of life successfully tapping into this skill to enhance whatever other methods they use for healing and their own growth.

Learning Focusing is rather like learning a language – learning the language of your own body. It's long been known that we store unprocessed emotions in our bodies, and Focusing gives us a gentle way to tap into the information that our body is holding for us.

The Alexander Technique (AT)

FM Alexander was an Australian actor who suffered from voice loss during performances. With his doctors unable to find a physical cause, Alexander set up a system of mirrors to observe himself and determined that he was contracting his whole body as he got ready to speak. He discovered that this contraction led to his head being pulled backwards and downwards which disrupted the normal working of his posture, breathing and vocal chords. After experimenting with ways to stop the habitual tension, he no longer lost his voice. He refined his technique over the years and helped many people to resolve habitual postural patterns, with a technique that essentially enables people to unlearn the bad postural habits they have, and free up the energy previously bound up in these habitual tension patterns.

Wholebody Focusing

Canadian Kevin McEvenue was never comfortable with the fact that the AT teacher was directing the client, even if it was for their own good. One day while doing an exercise with a Shiastsu teacher Kevin discovered that change could happen out of his own body's inner wisdom and Wholebody Focusing began to come into existence through Kevin's work with his own Focusing and AT practices and his work with clients.

Four Key Elements to Wholebody Focusing

(Elements sourced from *Focusing with Your Whole Body* by Addie van der Kooy & Kevin McEvenue)

There are four key elements to WBF:

- Awakening to the Body Wisdom
- Grounding and Presence
- Allowing a Felt Sense to emerge
- Holding Both with Equal Positive Regard

Awakening to the Body Wisdom

We live in a world where we worship mind and behave as if the body is just to carry the mind around. If we were to draw a cartoon person to illustrate this, they would have an enormous head and a tiny little body underneath. The reality however is that the body houses our unconscious and enormous wisdom which most of us simply don't know how to tap into. It is as if we are an iceberg, and our mind, what we know, is represented by the tiny portion of the iceberg sticking up out of water. Wholebody Focusing is a wonderful way to help us to get in touch with the wisdom held by our body – represented by the huge portion of the iceberg beneath the surface of the water. Our body not only holds the whole of any situation that keeps us from feeling good or being present, but also the seeds of what is needed in order to carry forward the situation so that stuck energy is released and we can return to the full flow of life.

For a brief overview to how it is that the body can contain such wisdom, view: [Why Focusing Works with Gene Gendlin and Nada Lou](#).

For an experiential sense of body aliveness, listen to the [conversation](#) between Serge Prengel and Karen Whalen on the Focusing Institute website.

If you are an intellectual sort who likes to know more, you might enjoy reading Rob Parker's excellent presentation of Eugene Gendlin's [Philosophy of the Implicit](#), which gives a really good sense of body as source of wisdom (and is a lot easier to read than Gendlin's philosophical works it is based on!) None of this information is however necessary in order to be able to utilise the skill of Focusing.

Grounding and Presence

Most of us live our lives in the choppy waters at the surface and rarely plumb the depths of the iceberg below. To access the wisdom beneath the surface we need to be able to sink below the surface level and go to the calmer waters beneath. Grounding is how we do that with Wholebody Focusing, and it leads to a different awareness to what we usually go through our lives with, which can be called Presence.

Grounding is actually very simple. It's a direct experience of the body in contact with the Earth, or whatever surface we are standing, sitting or lying on. It's a direct felt experience of being supported, being held, by the Earth. It's not something we access with our mind, but rather something that comes into our awareness as our mind quiets down and we go below the choppy waters at the surface of our life. The waves are still there, the upsets that want our attention, but with grounding we sink into our body and go beneath that surface level.

There isn't much to be said about grounding or presence, they need to be experienced!

Grounding Exercise

(Sourced from Alex Maunder)

OK so we are just going to take a few minutes, we are going to put it all on hold, and just sway from side to side... feeling your heels, and the sides of the feet, and the balls of the feet... just let everything happen and just allowing your body to be here in your space, shifting more weight on one leg, more weight on the other... just setting your own gentle swaying rhythm... and you can feel your toes as well, you can feel your heels, you can feel the balls of your feet, you can feel the whole soles of your feet, as you pay attention to them they get bigger, they spread out more, they're getting warmer, they're getting bigger, they're contacting ... just keep bringing the mind back to the sense of your feet contacting the earth, your weight dropping down through the pelvis and the legs into the earth, and coming back up again to support you... and when you are ready you can also spread your fingers out with your palms facing down, and ground through your hands... putting your attention for a while on your hands... then on your feet... then back to your hands... then back to your feet... and when you are ready holding your attention on both your feet in contact with the floor, and grounding down through your hands.

...

As you are grounding it can be helpful to see any thoughts that you become aware of as thought bubbles that you can simply allow to float up to the surface of the water without giving them any attention, and keep bringing your attention back to the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands.

Now would be a good time to view this video clip of Kevin McEvenue describing his sense of both [Wholebody Focusing and Grounded Presence](#).

If you would like more understanding of what is actually happening in the brain when we ground in this way, you could also read a [summary of some research](#) done into what is actually going on in the brain during Wholebody Focusing. For those of us inclined to being intellectual and/or overcomplicating things, an understanding of some of what is happening in the brain can help us to relax into the power of Grounded Presence.

Allowing a Felt Sense to Emerge

As Gendlin coined the term "felt sense" it's best to hear directly from him what a felt sense is:

".. there is a kind of bodily awareness that profoundly influences our lives and that can help us reach personal goals. So little attention has been paid to this mode of awareness that there are no ready-made words to describe it, and I have had to coin my own term: *felt sense*...

A felt sense will shift if you approach it in the right way. It will change even as you are making contact with it. When your felt sense of a situation changes, *you change* – and, therefore, so does your life...

A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. *Physical*. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time – encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail...

A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling. Since a felt sense doesn't communicate itself in words, it isn't easy to describe in words. It is unfamiliar, deep-down level of awareness that psychotherapists (along with almost everybody else) usually have not found.

Let me illustrate. Think of two people who play a major role in your life. Any two people. I'll call them John and Helen in this discussion, but substitute the names of your own people. Let your mind slide back and forth between these two people. Notice the inner aura that seems to come into existence when you let your

attention dwell on John, the sense of “all about John”. Notice the entirely different aura of Helen.” *Focusing, 1978*

Gendlin then goes on to explain the concept of the body shift:

“The most exciting characteristic of all is the fact that a felt sense, when you focus on it well, has the power to change. You can actually feel this change happening in your body. It is a well-defined physical sensation of something moving or shifting. It is invariably a pleasant sensation: a feeling of something coming unstuck or uncramped.

I can best describe it to you by starting with a familiar human experience: the odd feeling of knowing you have forgotten something but not knowing what it is. Undoubtedly this has happened to you more than once. You are about to take a plane trip, let’s say, to visit family or friends. You board the airplane with a small, insistent thought nagging you: you have forgotten something. The plane takes off. You stare out the window, going through various things in your mind, seeking that elusive little piece of knowledge. What did I forget? What *was* it?

You are troubled by the *felt sense* of some unresolved situation, something left undone, something left behind. Notice that you don’t have factual data. You have an inner aura, an internal taste. *Your body knows but you don’t*. Maybe you try to argue it away, try to squash it intellectually or rise about it – the method of belittling it. You tell yourself: no, I won’t let this bother me and spoil my trip. Of course that doesn’t work. The feeling is still there.

You sigh and rummage in your mind again. You find a possibility. “Helen’s party! I forgot to tell Helen I can’t come to her party!” This idea doesn’t satisfy the feeling. It is perfectly true that you forgot to tell Helen you would miss her party, but your body knows it isn’t this that has been nagging you all morning. You still don’t know what you forgot, and you still feel that wordless discomfort. Your body knows you have forgotten something else, and it knows what that something is. That is how you can tell it isn’t Helen’s party.

At some moments the felt sense of what it is gets so vague that it almost disappears, but at other moments it comes in so strongly that you feel you almost know. Then suddenly, from this felt sense, it bursts to the surface. The snapshots! I forgot to pack the pictures I was going to show Charlie! You have hit it, and the act of hitting it gives you a sense of sudden physical relief. Somewhere in your body, something releases, some tight thing lets go. You feel it all through you: Whew!

It feels good. You may feel bad about the pictures but the step feels good. This is one of the key characteristics of a shift in a felt sense: it always has that easing and sometimes very beautiful sensation of bodily release. It feels like exhaling after holding your breath. You can feel the tension draining out of your body.

There are no words in the language to describe the felt sense and its physical shifts. Therefore, I must give a name to that feeling of coming unstuck inside. I call it the *body shift*.” *Focusing 1978*

With WBF we work with a much wider felt sense than with the original form of Focusing. To help develop the felt sense it is important to pay attention to all the ways that our inner wisdom uses to help communicate it to us, which can include any of the following:

- Spontaneously arising imagery
- The particular posture we are in
- A gesture – our hands often communicate things to us that our mind is not yet aware of
- Any sensations in the body, including pain
- A sense of some sort of energy anywhere in our energy field

It is important to realise that the felt sense isn’t usually a clear easy to find sensation. As Gendlin so beautifully puts it, “Focusing to me is spending time with what’s directly here but not yet clear”. (*Focusing is...*

the murky edge – Youtube clip) The felt sense develops as we spend time with it, give it space to be what it already is and develop into something more as it needs to. It can sometimes help if we can find a “handle” for it – a word or image that helps to describe it. When we speak the handle out loud, we pay close attention to what happens with the felt sense and if the handle resonates we will feel some sort of body shift. There becomes a sequence of:

Sensing the felt sense → finding a handle for the felt sense → offering the handle to see if it resonates

The handle essentially helps the felt sense to feel heard and helps it to open up and tell you more, in its own time as its ready. However a handle isn't always necessary, sometimes we simply stay with a physical sensation or gesture or posture etc without needing to label it in any way, essentially simply keeping it company and allowing it to unfold in its own time.

To get a sense of how this is for Kevin, the creator of WBF, you can view this [short video clip](#), which will also help us to transition to the next important aspect of WBF.

In his workshops Kevin describes this stage of allowing a felt sense to emerge as follows:

“It is first of all about inviting what wants your attention to become more fully present in the way that **it** needs to, so that it can fully reveal its story. This invitation is then the starting point for a relationship with this place in which you can listen from (or with) your own wholebody sense of Ground and Presence to how it wants to express itself.” *Focusing with Your Whole Body* by Addie van der Kooy & Kevin McEvenue.

Once you have established a sense of Grounded Presence you simply start paying attention to your body, and just notice what's coming up for you right now, just see what's there for you in the moment.

Holding Both with Equal Positive Regard

Most of us are so used to the idea that we have to **do** something to effect any change that it can be quite an unfamiliar concept that all we need to do is accept how we are in each moment and hold a space for whatever inside that we are focusing on to unfold in its own time. That however is what is called for with Wholebody Focusing! We simply go into Grounded Presence, invite what inside wants our attention, and then keep it company while it unfolds. Kevin's phrase for this is to *hold both in equal positive regard*, with both referring to both the sense of Grounded Presence and whatever inside us wants our attention in the moment.

In practice this means keeping an awareness of the container of Grounded Presence while making space for the felt sense to emerge. It may or may not include finding a handle for the felt sense and seeing if it resonates, as discussed in the previous section. Sometimes it is without words, simply following a gesture or posture or staying with something in our energy field, giving it space to be as it is. Wholebody Focusing is an alchemical process where change comes from inside simply from us giving what is inside the space it needs to unfold.

There are various stumbling blocks to being able to simply hold a space for whatever needs to arise, which we will address below. For now simply have a go at going into Grounded Presence, invite what wants attention to emerge, and stay with it as long as it needs to unfold.

When it isn't easy to hold both in equal positive regard

The curious paradox: when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. Carl Rogers

When a part of me feels loved, it awakens to its own healing. Kevin McEvenue

The two quotations above beautifully summarise the process, however it isn't always plain sailing when we are trying to create space for something that feels uncomfortable. This section suggests a few aspects to be mindful of when the process feels like it's stuck or no longer carrying forward.

Merging and Dissociating

A common challenge with any kind of Focusing is where we are merged with one part of ourselves while pushing away another part. Whenever there is an area in our life that is really stuck there is likely to be this duality within our psyche. To move forward we need to step back from the part we are merged with and truly give space to both aspects of us. One way to help to do this is to use the language *something in me ... or a part of me...* as this language creates a little distance between you and the uncomfortable felt sense.

The most common way of knowing that you are merged with one part and pushing another part away is where you are judging a feeling inside or the unfolding process. This indicates that there is a part that is feeling uncomfortable with what is arising and a part that is holding something vulnerable. It can be very helpful when you realise that this is happening to put both your hands up and get a sense of which part is in which hand, and then let the part that you don't identify with so strongly reveal its feelings or story. You usually however first need to acknowledge the critical part (for example by saying *something in me thinks this feeling is stupid or this process is stupid, it's never going to get me where I need to go*).

It is quite common to have a situation in Focusing where there are two parts and it feels impossible to resolve. It is very important to remember that we don't have to **do** anything to find a resolution – we just need to make space for both parts, holding them both within the container of Grounded Presence. Seemingly impossible inner conflicts generally find a way forward when both parts have been heard.

Getting the Right Distance

Eugene Gendlin says that when Focusing we need to be close enough to smell the soup but not so close that we fall in! If you are totally identified with a particular feeling or judgment, then you need to go back to Grounded Presence and create some space between you and the felt sense. You may also find that you have gone from making a space for a felt sense to marinating in an emotion. Remember that an emotion and a felt sense are not the same thing. If you find yourself swamped by an emotion, go back to your grounding and create enough space to be able to access a felt sense of the whole issue to sit with.

It is important not to attempt to work from the epicentre of a strong felt sense. Instead find the outer edges of the felt sense and ground them back down to your feet. There is nothing to be gained by pushing into the centre of a difficult felt sense. Also remember to bring compassion to yourself and watch out for any judgmental thoughts about your process.

When pain or discomfort grows

It can be tempting to think that there is something wrong if a felt sense becomes stronger, particularly when it is a painful sensation. It is important to remember that whatever we put our attention on grows, so it's natural that discomfort or pain can increase initially as we give it the space to be there. Remember that these felt sensations are generally associated with parts of us that we have neglected for a long time. A helpful analogy is how it is when your leg has gone to sleep after sitting on it too long, initially it's numb and you don't feel anything, but as energy begins to flow through it again it can be uncomfortable for a time.

The Need for Self-Empathy

Many of us are masters at being critical of ourselves and lack practice at bringing empathy to our vulnerabilities. Wholebody Focusing offers is a beautiful arena to learn to bring compassion and empathy to ourselves when we are feeling uncomfortable. If you find it very difficult to stay with challenging felt senses you may benefit from finding an image that helps to evoke compassion within you. Rita Loyd's [Embracing Shadow Self](#) painting is an example of the sort of image that you may find helpful to have as a visual reminder when you are Focusing.

I don't understand what the felt sense is trying to tell me

Most of us are so used to analysing and understanding everything with our minds that staying with the murky edge of the felt sense can be challenging. However once we've had some experience Focusing it becomes apparent that if we just create space for whatever is emerging without forcing meaning, it can unfold in its own time. It's not uncommon for the meaning of a felt sense or image that arises in Focusing to only become apparent much later on in the Focusing session, or maybe even in a subsequent session. These issues are resolved first by carry forward in the body and the mind often takes some time to catch up. If you find yourself dwelling on the need to understand something, acknowledge the part of you that is struggling to trust the process (in whatever words resonate for you) and give that part some space before going back to the original felt sense.

Watch out for "Fix It" thoughts

The unfolding that Wholebody Focusing offers us comes from making space, and having respect, for each part of us that has a stake in the issue we are Focusing on. One common way to stop the flow is to become identified with the need to fix whatever is perceived to be wrong. As soon as you notice this, acknowledge the part of you that is feeling it has to **do** something and make space for that part to have its feelings heard. Usually once the part has been acknowledged you are able to return to the felt sense you were sitting with.

Ways to Use Wholebody Focusing

Inviting what wants attention

The most effective way to work with Wholebody Focusing is often to simply go into Grounded Presence and then notice what in your body is drawing your attention. This way you allow your own body wisdom to guide the focus of the session. The body has a wonderful way of bringing forward whatever is priority for you to make space for.

Working with a specific issue

Sometimes we have a burning address that we want to address rather than simply following body wisdom. To work with a specific issue, simply go into Grounded Presence, and then invite a felt sense for "the whole of this issue". Remember that the felt sense may be very slight to begin with, and will come into focus as you make space for it to be just as it is.

Working with a dream

Wholebody Focusing is a wonderful way to work with dreams. Usually dreams have very specific felt senses when we recall them or a single image from a dream. To work with a dream using Wholebody Focusing, go into Grounded Presence and then recall the dream or dream image. It can also be helpful to experiment with holding each of the characters in a different hand, particularly where there are two characters in the dream who do not share the same perspective.

Working with a photo or image

Sometimes we just can't seem to get close to what we want to work with. Something is there but we don't seem to be making space for it to form. At times like these it can be helpful to sit down with a pile of magazines and invite your inner wisdom to guide you to an image that represents something in your inner world that could use some attention. Once you have the image, place it in front of you, close your eyes and go into Grounded Presence, then open your eyes and briefly look at the image. When you are ready close your eyes again and notice what is there in your body. You can also use this if you come across an image that is disturbing or emotionally upsetting to you and you aren't sure why – this can be a way to access something inside that needs attention.

Working with something in your energy field

(Inspired by Glenn Fleisch)

Sometimes there is a sense of something there but it doesn't feel like a bodily sense. We can work with Wholebody Focusing simply making space for an energy in our energy field. Simply get a sense of the space occupied by the energy and work with the sense of the energy as a felt sense. Make as much space for this energy as it needs, allow it to be just as it is and unfold as it needs to.

Companioning someone in Wholebody Focusing

We can often go to much greater depths with a companion accompanying us on our Focusing journey. The key to being an effective companion for someone practising WBF is to be in grounded presence yourself as you accompany them. It is beyond the scope of this simple introduction to teach listening skills, if you would like to explore this for yourself you may like to begin with Ann Weiser Cornell's article [The Power of Listening](#). While it is written for an audience of therapists, there is much in it that is of use to a Focusing Companion. There are also two conversations on the Focusing Institute website between Serge Prengel and Glenn Fleisch that communicate beautifully about the field of presence created when we companion someone in Focusing: [Resonance](#) and [Wholebody Focusing](#).

For More Information

The following are both good sources of learning more subtleties of the Wholebody Focusing process:

[Conversation with Kevin McEvenue](#) on the Focusing Institute website (free MP3)

[Focusing with Your Whole Body](#) – CD/Workbook Learning Program (available to purchase from Focusing Institute website)

There is also an [index on the Focusing Website](#) listing other resources available on Wholebody Focusing.

To understand more of the power of use of gesture in Wholebody Focusing, see [Right in Their Hands: How gestures imply the body's next steps in Focusing-oriented therapy](#) by Glenn Fleisch

Ann Weiser Cornell's article on [Radical Gentleness](#): Transformation of the Inner Critic is not specific to Wholebody Focusing, but makes very interesting reading. While not specific to Wholebody Focusing, there is a wealth of information on Ann's website, including her blog postings and a big [list of articles](#).

While also not specific to Wholebody Focusing, there is an excellent article on [Solo Focusing](#) well worth a read by Kay Hoffmann.

There is a wealth of learning and inspiration in the [Focusing Conversations](#) on the Focusing Institute website.