

## RECOVERY FOCUSING

### **Recovering our True Self, Accessing our Higher Self, and Connecting to our Higher Power**

**by Suzanne Noël, Focusing Trainer, Costa Rica**

**Focusing** is a practice of processing issues or situations (or feelings) through the grounded, embodied **inner holding of and interaction with** the “**felt sense**” of these issues or feelings, first made teachable by Eugene Gendlin, at the University of Chicago. Through 25 years of research, it has been found that therapy clients who change are doing this inner act of processing from an inside space, what he termed Felt Sensing -- or Focusing. (Gendlin, 1981).

Focusing involves *sensing into* the meaning of things by going inside yourself and noticing *what comes from this inside space*. First, “*something*” -- vague forms. As we stay with it, this “*something*” -- or *felt sense* -- comes into “Focus”. It opens up, and reveals its implicit meaning or innate wisdom.

Felt sensing brings rapid insights and an actual bodily felt relief and release to problems (a *felt shift*). Stuck feelings, challenging situations, painful issues, are resolved, “let go”.

This *embodied processing* is surprisingly empowering because the clarity and insights one gains are known and held inside oneself in a *whole person* way: held with the body, the heart, the mind, and the soul (“Observer/Witness Self”). Focusing integrates our separate ways of experiencing into one **whole knowing**.

Focusing is therefore a very powerful process for healing those parts inside us which have suffered so deeply from the fall into the powerlessness of a self-destructive, baffling and cunning addiction or addictive process.

*"Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness." (Gendlin)*

A primary aspect of Focusing is that it offers “spacious loving attention” to our inner experience. Focusing’s patient waiting and “being with” our felt sense allows it to shift into the next naturally implied step of healing, thereby allowing us to move forward into a more integrated state of being. Some benefits of this include:

- *The locked, blocked, knotted energy in the body is allowed to shift and release.*
- *Emotional ease and mental clarity are attained.*
- *Mental tension dissolves.*
- *We often experience a deep sense of gratitude and connectedness with something greater than ourselves ( or to a greater sense of total well being).*

Our natural, innate healing process is allowed to fully unfold and carry us forward in all areas of our living. We are finally able to truly experience human *being*, an enjoyable sense of aliveness and calm “being here/now” that is deeply satisfying on many levels.

**Recovery Focusing** enhances and supports 12 Step Recovery by offering us this *whole person process* to our Recovery Program, moving us through the “heart” of addiction and woundedness into healing in a gentle but powerful way. We "recover" our truth, our sense of self, our aliveness. Simply put, we recover our “true self”, gain access to our “Higher Self”, and eventually connect to our “Higher Power”.

“My brain is so numb I can only think in metaphors”.

(G., a Recovery Focusing client)

Recovery Focusing applies this *felt sensing process* to each Step as we work through it, either holding it as a whole or breaking it down into its principal aspects. It enables us to experience the Step internally rather than just processing it intellectually.

It is basically about Focusing *Into* each Step, what it means *now*, and then waiting for a felt experience of this to form. By being with this Felt Sense of the Step, its meaning is freshly revealed to us

Recovery Focusing explores “the worst of” an addictive process and compares this with “the best of Recovery”. This “compare and contrast” approach allows us to clearly “see” our basic choice: to return to the sunken flat powerlessness of addiction or enjoy the empowered aliveness of Recovery.

Experiencing the possible “best of” Recovery allows our body to have a *felt hope* of Recovery, an inner manifestation of all that could be. It acts as a light toward which we are moving, a light which we can actually experience now!

Below I offer you some voices of clients who have done Recovery Focusing in Costa Rica Recovery House, San Jose, Costa Rica.

**Step One, “We admitted we were powerless over [our addiction] and that our lives had become unmanageable” (AA Big Book):**

**Focusing Instruction: What comes from inside about powerlessness and unmanageability?**

**P (Alcoholic):** “I see my brain, all the veins filled with blood. It is turning into to something white, and then something comes, a connection between my brain and my heart -- a back and forth connection between them.” (She stays with it) “Now, I feel a lump in my throat. A lump caused by alcohol.” (And an insight comes.) “I can see that alcohol is breaking her heart - brain connection.”.

**M** ( Cocaine addict): “I see a lot of things broken up, like incomplete. I feel like an empty sack. And empty sack and without sanity.”

**M 2** (Crack cocaine addict): “I see myself sleeping under a bridge. I feel disgust, nausea right here in my belly. This needs “Love”.

**L.**: “The word that comes from inside is ‘Remorse’. I want to take everything out of myself that has damaged everything and everyone.” He makes a stabbing motion into his heart and says “It hurts my heart to think about what it was like”.

**E**, “I feel like I have sand all over me, everywhere, and like I want to clean myself off, wipe this sand off, but I can’t” (He motions as if wiping the sand).

Here, then, we have seen how the clients have experienced the “worst” of their addiction for this moment. They have gotten in touch with a new sense of it and expressed this. Because the sharing is so heart-felt, the whole group listens quietly and intently.

**Focusing Instruction: What comes from inside about “Sobriety”:**

**M:** “I get an image of a family picture, everyone is smiling. The words that come with this picture is “Collective Harmony” where everyone is happy.” He sits up, looks proud.

**M 2:** “I see an explosion of light. I see myself wearing a white suit. The word that comes is “metamorphosis”. Everything inside and out is white.” He stays with this. “Now what is coming is “Hello”. (And he smiles.). “Hello”. (He continues smiling.)

**L:** “Sobriety to me means to feel good. It means feeling good, standing up tall, and being well loved.”. His entire body posture changes as he sits up and confidently states this.

**E.** “I get the word: Freedom. I see myself going to the top of a mountain which has handrails. There is wind and I like the scenery. I feel free.”

**P:** “I see a road, and some cars are moving along fine, moving forward, while other cars are stuck on the side of the road, disabled. I see myself as no longer disabled. I am now running smoothly down the road.”

These clients now have a felt experience of sobriety. They have taken their addiction inside and felt the powerlessness of it all, and then have shifted into a sense of what sobriety could be like, what it is like Now, inside them. Their mood has shifted and they now have hope for themselves.

Recovery Focusing also introduces the compassionate “Focusing Attitude” into our Step work by presenting some ways in which Self Empathy may be explored and brought

inside our bodies (Lee, Domain Focusing). This kind, friendly, or curious way of being with ourselves and our felt experience creates a welcoming sense of safety for the Focusing process, allowing it to open up and unfold as it will.

G. works on her Step Six character defect of “laziness”. She says: “I get an image of it as me being inside a cocoon”. By staying with it, she is able to realize that this brings her some much needed comfort and is able to have some “friendliness” for her “laziness”.

She smiles as she realizes that her laziness is not all a bad thing, that it is giving her something positive and needed. Then she asks it what it needs:. She says: “I get an image of a beetle pushing a ball of dirt. This means I have to do the work I need to do. It will be hard, like climbing up a mountain, but I will be able to get to the top and then I will feel good.”

We often start Recovery Focusing groups with Self Empathy, asking ourselves how we need to be with ourselves and checking to see if we can bring that inside. P. for example was able to see that he needs to be compassionate with himself, and patted himself on the shoulder. He says he has never patted himself like this. This patting brought the needed compassion inside. Starting with Self Empathy creates a feeling of inner safety.

Each Step gains greater personal meaning to those of us who process it in our own unique embodied way. We have personally *experienced* the Step as our body lives it. Clients who practice Focusing are more and more able to actually sense into their bodies and describe what is there rather than just get insights from the images themselves. In Recovery Focusing, we welcome all that comes. Some clients only get a phrase or a word. This is fine. It is *their* phrase and it came from inside *them*.

Here are some more examples of Focusing into **Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity:**

After sharing images of themselves as they really were when hitting their “bottom”, this is what comes about their **Higher Power:**

**J:** “I see a superior being with a long cape. This cape is made up of the universe, and seems alive. It feels majestic. This majestic being has his back turned, but as if saying, ‘follow me’”.

**L.:** “I see Jesus, but Jesus is supporting my back, gently nudging me along, saying ‘Go ahead’”.

**L.** “I get an image of big hands scooping me out of turbulent water, and placing me on dry land. I feel relief inside. Like the worst is over”.

**V:** “I see a white light surrounding me. I can feel it on my skin, all around me. I feel cocooned in white light. Protected.”

C: “I see a hole, something small on the horizon, toward which I am moving. As I go up to it, it opens up into a big space where all is well. It feels good.”

Now, I invite the clients to hold the idea of **Sanity**, stay with it a while, and wait for something new to come about “Sanity” from inside:

**M 2:** “I see a mummy breaking out of his wrappings. The words that come are: “Breaking the chains”. I see my face as it is emerging from these wrappings. **I feel Free. At peace. “With HOPE”.**

**L:** “I feel capable and as if I am doing my process. I feel happy. **Conscious.**”

**E:** “I see myself making decisions, and taking down notes of some sort -- at work. **The feeling is of security and safety.**”

**M:** “I see a world of white cotton, where everything is clean. Everything is new. I feel relief inside.. And a **sense of opportunity.**”

**R** “I see a Greek Goddess. The word “illumination” comes. I feel **at ease.**”

**J** “I see myself taking the reins of a horse, in a carriage. I feel very **sure of myself.**”

And, finally, a client shares what came to him about *Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to our [Higher Power]*. He sees lights flickering on and off in a room, until, finally, the light remains on. (He has previously had a felt sense of falling, falling into the black hole in the middle of his chest, a great emptiness.) He now understands that though he may lose contact with his Higher Power (lights out at times), eventually the light would remain on.

We can see that most of the clients get images, and that these images carry a certain feeling inside the body. From these examples we see that Focusing into “sanity” has enabled them to experience it as “safety”; feeling “at ease”; “conscious”; and “with hope”. Thus, through Focusing , the clients themselves experience the best of Recovery.

In addition, Focusing processing can be used each morning as a way to start or close the day with a “Clearing a Space” exercise (see below). It can be applied to whatever may be in the way of our working a certain Step, or in the way of our serenity (sobriety, recovery).

It enables us to process feelings that may come up as we work through our Steps, thus offering us an additional tool to face life on life’s terms.

Should 12 Steppers eventually move into advanced Focusing practices through Focusing Partnership and Focusing Community Changes, they will have another safe “sacred sharing” space for this powerful processing, to strengthen their Program of Recovery.

The supportive quality of Focusing/Listening exchanges in Focusing Partnership creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and self respect. The unconditional positive regard offered in this egalitarian relationship is like medicine to our vulnerable, damaged selves. Focusing partnership helps mend our trust in honest communication *and in our own ability to access truth*. It also gives us a sense of “worthiness” by enabling us to provide meaningful listening to another, so that we feel we are giving as we receive.

Focusing thus complements the basic dynamics of Recovery which include honest sharing and peer support.

Crossing these two powerful practices makes Recovery all the more desirable and enjoyable. Both Focusing and the working of the Steps help people to “comprehend the word serenity...and know a new peace and a new happiness” (Big Book, Promises).

No longer “stuck” in an addictive process, we are free to process our stuckness.

Through this processing, our true self comes forth in grounded authenticity. By developing our ability to process through our “Self in Presence” (See Ann Weiser Cornel), we experience our Higher Self, that wise sense of our observer/witness self who is able to be with all experiences in a calm, lovingly detached manner. Finally, Focusing often directly opens us up into a spiritual experience of connectedness to *all that is*, a “surrendered” state where all is well, which is sensed wholly in mind/soul/body, heart as a complete experience of being “at ease”.

*“Your physically felt body is, in fact, part of a gigantic system  
of here and other places, now and other times,  
you and other people, in fact the whole universe.  
This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system  
is the body as it is felt from inside.” (Eugene T. Gendlin)*

The possibility exists that Focusing may one day become The Thirteenth Step, the one tool in our kit that deepens and furthers Recovery so that we can truly “wear life like a loose garment”, enjoying our natural aliveness and creativity and deeply connecting to “*all that is*” in a profoundly experienced way.

### **SAMPLE RECOVERY FOCUSING EXERCISES**

On the next page below, I offer examples of exercises used in group sessions with recovering addicts at Costa Rica Recovery House. These are taken from my ‘Recovery Focusing’ manual, intended for working with groups in early Recovery.

**RECOVERY FOCUSING**  
**Suzanne L. Noël, CFT**

**GENERAL CLEARING A SPACE EXERCISE**

**1. Grounding Lead In.**

Take a few minutes to sense into your body. Notice your feet. Take a deep breath. Move your attention from your feet up toward your face, slowly, noticing how you are inside. Take another deep breath and notice how your chest and belly are right now. Notice your face and forehead. Breathe deeply.

**2. Clearing a Space**

Ask yourself the following questions:

What is in the way of my sobriety today? Wait.

Write this down by naming it briefly..\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Imagine yourself taking this out of yourself and placing it gently beside you, on a bench perhaps, knowing you can work on it if this is what really needs your Focusing attention. If it is too big, place it in another state or country (or your Higher Power's caring hands, if you already have one).

Ask again, "What is in the way of my working Step One (or any other Step)?"

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Put this gently aside as well, knowing you can come back to it if need be.

Now ask, "What is in the way of my serenity right now?"

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Put this aside as well.

Finally, check back in again.. Ask, "Is there anything underneath these that may need my Focusing attention now?" Wait.

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Gently put each one aside until you have a sense of "Self in Presence", a sense of yourself as being separate from all of these, an "observer" or witness self (Cornel).

3. From this Self in Presence, pick one of the above and hold it as a whole and **WAIT for a felt sense of “all of that” to form in your body.**

Where do you sense you are holding this in your body: belly, chest, throat?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

**Describe** what it feels like in your body? Tight, Open, hard, etc?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. If you do not get an actual body sense, you may have gotten a phrase or an image or a metaphor (memory, gesture, sound, etc.) that describes your experience of what you chose to work on. (See “Avenues of Felt Sensing”, end of manual.)

**Symbolize** Felt Sense with a phrase, image, metaphor, memory, gesture, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_

Ask, **“What is the worst of this?” (Or the crux of this?)**

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Ask, **“What does it need?”**

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Now, go back inside and consider the word **“sobriety”**. What does it mean to you? Think about this a while.

**WAIT for a sense of that “sobriety” to come from inside** -- for a new, fresh felt experience of “Sobriety” to form.

Do you see an image of that? Or does a phrase come to you?

Describe what is coming: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How does your chest/belly/body feel when you think of that?

\_\_\_\_\_

Holding how you feel inside when about sobriety, ask yourself

**What is the best of that?**

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Anytime you are not feeling well, you can take a minute to Focus on whatever is troubling you. Take a minute to wait for a felt experience of it to come from inside, either a phrase, a sense in your body, an image or metaphor, or a memory. Describe this. Then, ask yourself, "What is the worst of this?" Then, ask yourself what this needs. Finally, imagine how it would be if this were resolved, if it got what it needed. Allow this to come into your body. Notice the best of this inside. Enjoy. Share with your Sponsor.

### FOCUSING INTO STEP ONE

- 1.) **Grounding** Lead In.
- 2.) **Positive Felt Experience** of a Happy SOBER time in your life. (OPTIONAL -- May start with "Self Empathy", See Step Four.) Scan your life until you find this. Describe this "happy" time with a phrase or word. See if you get an image.

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

How does this feel inside your body? Wait.

Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

Share with Group. Enjoy.

(This is to remind you that your body knows how to feel good without drugs; to remind you that we can experience natural highs that do not have negative consequences.)

- 3.) ***Step One: "We admitted we were powerless over [our addiction] and that our lives had become unmanageable"***

**Holding and Waiting:** Take a minute to sense into how you were before recovery.

Think about this **powerlessness and unmanageability**.

**Wait for a Felt Experience** of this to form.

**Symbolize:**

See if a phrase comes that captures this powerlessness and unmanageability.

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

If no phrase comes, see if you get an image or metaphor (memory, gesture, etc)?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

How is this inside your body? (Wait)

**Describe:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the worst of this?**

\_\_\_\_\_

Let us remember that we do have a disease that always gets worst, never better. As recovering people, we have the choice to return to this powerlessness or to get a higher power, be in fellowship, share our experience and feelings, work our Program, and enjoy Recovery and Sobriety.

4.) Take some time to **think about the terms “Sobriety” and “Recovery”.**

What do they mean to you? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Now, hold the word “Recovery” and WAIT.**

Wait for something new to come from inside about this.

You may get a phrase or an image or a felt sense in your body.

**Describe:**

\_\_\_\_\_

How does this feel in your body?

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is the best of this?**

**Describe:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Allow this felt experience of the best of Recovery to expand inside you.

Enjoy.

**HERE ARE YOUR CHOICES NOW THAT YOU ARE IN RECOVERY:**

**WHEN YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE, YOU CAN:**

**1) CHOOSE TO USE AND FEEL:**

Write down your description of powerlessness:

\_\_\_\_\_

OR

2) YOU CAN CHOOSE TO STAY ON THE PATH OF RECOVERY AND CALL YOUR SPONSOR, WORK A STEP, PRAY, FOCUS, WRITE, JUST GET THROUGH THE DISCOMFORT AND EXPERIENCE:

Write down your description of the best of Recovery/Sobriety:

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### **INTEGRATING FOCUSING INTO YOUR RECOVERY**

(Sample from 'Recovery Focusing' Manual by Suzanne L. Noël)

#### **Step Work.**

Keep taking time to be with whatever may be in the way of your working any particular Step on any particular situation. Remember, in any situation that is disturbing to you, you can apply any Step to it. If you sense you may need to work a certain Step on something, but feel that something in you is resisting, "Clear a Space" around this, as follows:

Ask: What is in the way of my working this Step on this? Wait and list whatever comes up.

Be with any of these in a Focusing way.

How is this inside? What does this need?

#### **Morning Inventory:**

Each morning, you can also ask yourself what your Recovery needs today. Write down what may be in the way of your recovery or your serenity. Pick one of these things and process it in a Focusing way. You will start the day feeling lighter and more connected to your Program, to your Higher Self, and your Higher Power.

#### **Starting the Day in the Light:**

You can also start the day waiting for a way to be with yourself today, as follows:

Sense into your life context as it is now.

Given this life context, how do you need to be with yourself? (Can you be kind, friendly, patient, forgiving, compassionate, supportive, etc?) Wait for your body to answer how you need to be with yourself.

Now, try to bring some of this (friendliness, supportiveness, patience, etc.) inside. Maybe use a gesture to help hold this, like holding yourself or patting yourself or placing your hand somewhere – say, your heart area, chest area, belly, etc. (See Robert Lee, Domain Focusing)

### **Pausing and taking a few minutes to be with yourself.**

Anytime you are uncomfortable or disturbed, take some time to be with your inside body space. Wait for something to form. As it comes into Focus, describe it to yourself. Ask it what it needs. How would your Higher Self or Higher Power be with all this? Share your experience with another person.

## **RECOVERY FOCUSING**

Shifting from being stuck in an addictive process  
to processing your stuckness

**Suzanne L. Noël, CFT**

**Web site: [www.recoveryfocusing.com](http://www.recoveryfocusing.com)**

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