

FOCUSING, MINDFULNESS, AND MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY

Three Ways Toward Wellbeing in Everyday Life

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Since childhood, I have traveled, met different people, visited many places, experienced new landscapes, tasted different food, and learned about other ways of living. Since then, I have been experiencing and recognizing how people each give their own definitions or names to other people, circumstances, and objects. What seems alike or ‘the same’ has a different name and meaning to each person. Certainly there are similarities and commonalities. At the same time, certain unique aspects exist for each individual.

In order to constructively engage in a conversation about this diversity, something that has seemed essential to me is to start from the things themselves, from the circumstances, from the people and their concrete expressions, within their current context. This is not easy because I can very quickly assume that I understand everyone and the meanings that they communicate through their expressions, or I can hang on to what is similar and miss out on the uniqueness of each case.

When I started to learn Focusing, I found that it was something new and familiar at the same time. Tapping into one’s intuition and that sensation that “I’m feeling it”—the famous Mexican *corazonada* (a feeling or “premonition” that comes from the “heart” about something.) Tapping into one’s intuition, and that sensation that “*I’m feeling it*”, akin to the Mexican *corazonada*, has been a way of experiencing—paying attention to myself—in a different manner than what is normally considered rational. Thus, attending to the body in order to identify the felt sense and realize that a change process was brought about from *there* was an amazing discovery and at the same time a clarifying confirmation.

FOCUSING AND MINDFULNESS IN AN EXPERIENTIAL PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL GROUP PROJECT

Four years ago, some colleagues and I started a project working with women who play the role of caretakers. At the beginning of the workshop, the participants mentioned instances of discomfort and dissatisfaction in their lives. They suffered from insomnia, headaches, muscular pain, upset stomach, and high blood pressure; in addition, they felt pressured, burdened, and oppressed. They felt they did not deserve to rest or get sick, and spent many hours during the day thinking about their problems and concerns. How could we help them develop a sense of wellbeing in their daily lives?

Trusting that we could focus on the participants’ organismic wisdom in order to create new and better alternatives for living, we proposed the creation of an Experiential Psycho-Educational Group (EPEG). The goal was for the participants to learn to:

- Be in inner silence
- Recognize and welcome the felt sense
- Differentiate the felt sense from feelings and emotions, and
- Express themselves directly from their felt sense, through experiencing.

In the EPEG sessions, our starting place was about being fully present for and with all participants, acknowledging one another in interaction, based on just being there with them. Therefore, we felt that it was important to pay attention to our own attitudes, as well as the attitudes that the women demonstrated when they were with each other. Here, we remember some of the attitudes learned in Focusing (Moreno, 2009):

- To be available to receive and to listen
- To be in inner silence
- To be open to allowing ourselves to feel whatever we feel when we are with other people
- To welcome and be present with the felt sense that arises, without trying to change it
- To describe, without judgment, lived experiences and behaviors, and
- To warmly and respectfully welcome people as well as their lived experiences.

The EPEG sessions were based in these Focusing modes of interaction. Later, we proposed a variety of activities to help participants develop these attitudes. Although in my Focusing experience I usually find many activities aimed at promoting this learning, it is also true that at times, these are not enough, given the variety of life conditions and ways the participants interact.

MY ENCOUNTER WITH MINDFULNESS

When we started the EPEG sessions, I happened to come across an article (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) about a stress-reduction program based on Mindfulness. I was surprised to see the similarities between some aspects of Mindfulness and Focusing. Later, I read some books on the topic (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2010; 1994, 2005; Siegel, 2012) and did some activities that were described in those books.

Kabat-Zinn (1990/2010) states that “learning to listen to our body is essential in order to improve our health and quality of life” (p. 59). He also mentions that Mindfulness requires certain attitudes, such as:

- No judging
- Being patient in order to respect life’s own rhythms
- Having a beginner’s mind, open to whatever comes
- No trying or assuming that something specific should happen

- Trusting ourselves and whatever arises from our being, and
- Accepting things as they are.

In searching for activities designed for practicing Mindfulness, I discovered that in some ways Focusing and Mindfulness share a very similar horizon. Before discovering Mindfulness, for example, we paid attention to the sounds in the environment as a way to be only with the sounds, without labeling or thinking about them—just being aware of how we sensed and felt in listening to the sounds. Once I found out about Mindfulness, I discovered a similar emphasis on bringing awareness to what I see or hear that I found in Focusing. It seemed to me that Focusing and Mindfulness have activities and attitudes in common, although sometimes these may go by different names. Finding/feeling these similarities was a great personal discovery.

During my search, I remembered something that I read a long time ago from a Buddhist Master about living in the present: “When you chop wood, you chop wood. When you drink water, you drink water.” Remembering those words gave me clarity about something else Focusing and Mindfulness have in common: with their attitudes of welcoming what is here and being respectful, and with the attention to experiencing, they are both something that can be present in daily life—not just for special moments.

When EPEG participants expressed that they did not have enough time to carry out the exercises, we proposed that one option was for them to figure out a different way of doing some of their normal activities during the week. One participant discovered that while washing dishes after lunch, she could pay attention to the water, the dishes, the soap, to the movement, to her hands—thus engaging in Mindfulness right then and there. I was surprised and curious about her discovery.

She also realized that while she was mindfully engaged, she stopped thinking about her pending tasks and preoccupations; she felt more relaxed and rested, and also experienced a state of serenity. “When I washed dishes with this attitude, my worries went away, and I felt a very peaceful mood,” she reported.

The similarities between Mindfulness and *Clearing a Space* in Focusing (Klagsbrun, Lennox & Summers, 2010) are many. Washing dishes while paying attention to the sensory experience of the task with a mindful attitude seems to have the equivalent effect as the process of setting aside problems and worries in the *Clearing a Space* exercise. Both practices allow people to drop their habitual preoccupations which prevent them from experiencing the underlying sensations of peacefulness.

Since these activities allowed participants stay in touch with the sensory experience of daily tasks and develop a detached attitude toward them, Focusing and Mindfulness were integrated in the project. Paying attention to the experiencing and to the here-and-now was done more often. And the participants developed some attitudes relevant to the felt sense: curiosity, patience, trust, non-judgment, and welcoming.

MY ENCOUNTER WITH MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY (MBCT)

During the early sessions of the EPEG workshop, participants reported having constant negative thoughts. “I spend all day thinking about my problems,” said one of them. “I get tired of rehashing the same to-dos and preoccupations,” expressed another. “I can’t stop thinking. I feel desperate!” said another one, almost crying. They also referred to their feeling sad, bored, tired, and depressed. Some cognitive therapy authors (Knapp & Beck, 2008) have pointed to this relationship between negative thoughts around problems and a feeling of sadness, demotivation, and hopelessness, also noting that as the catastrophic or problematic thoughts disappear, the mood changes.

When treating people with depression within the framework of MBCT, changing negative thoughts and improving the mood is one of the major goals. Some years ago, I developed an alternative way of *Clearing a Space*, which I called *Inner Silence*. It is an aural metaphor, while *Clearing a Space* is a spatial metaphor. I have found that some people respond more easily to the spatial metaphor, and some respond more easily to the aural metaphor. Some activities to promote *Inner Silence* are described in Moreno (2009). One of the participants who used *Inner Silence* said: “My worries went away,” “I put aside my concerns and felt relaxed,” and “I stopped thinking as I usually do.” The group was discovering that when engaging in *Clearing a Space* or finding their *Inner Silence*, their minds got quieter, and their moods changed.

I began to realize that there were similarities between MBCT and Focusing. I thought: “We follow similar processes but explain them differently.” I felt that awareness as a rich opening to new possibilities.

Before the EPEG I didn’t know about MBCT. But then I found an article about the use of MBCT to treat people suffering from depression (Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby & Lau, 2000). Later, I found others about treatment of people after they had attempted suicide (Luoma & Villate, 2012; Williams & Swales, 2004; Williams, Barnhofer, Crane & Beck, 2005; Williams, Dugan, Crane & Fennell, 2006). They helped me to think about how I could cross Focusing and MBCT in theoretical, clinical, and experiential dimensions.

From Focusing, I realized that the activities that help to set aside thoughts can be used by themselves, based on the sense of wellbeing that they create in a person, and they can also be used as a preparation stage for removing obstacles to easily connecting and attending to the experiencing. From MBCT I realized that it was important to pay attention to thoughts, sometimes to put them aside for a while, and sometimes to look at them in a detached way. In addition, it is possible to use MBCT theory to explain mood changes that come when doing *Inner Silence* Focusing activities. Here, I discovered that I had “a new language” to talk to MBCT psychotherapists. I felt relieved because at that time we worked in an institution that was cognitive-behavioral in orientation. Now I felt that I had the tools to build a communication bridge with them.

In one of these articles (Luoma & Villate, 2012) there is a reference to something that

the authors call *experiential avoidance*, which is: a “tendency to escape or avoid unwanted thoughts, emotions, memories, and sensations, even when doing so is futile or causes harm” (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follete & Strosahl, 1996; cited in Luoma & Villate, 2012, p. 266). Such “*experiential avoidance* accounts for as much as 16% to 25% of the variance in behavioral health problems generally, including those identified as pathways to suicidality” (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda & Lillis, 2006; cited in Luoma & Villate, 2012, p. 266). In this context, we realized that helping people pay attention, with a Focusing attitude, to their felt sense, feelings, thoughts, and movements could be a way to change that *experiential avoidance*.

A NEW PROJECT USING FOCUSING, MINDFULNESS AND MBCT

The EPEG project helped us to see some possibilities for *crossing* Focusing, Mindfulness and MBCT. The project also showed us the possibility of suggesting to the participants some activities to do during the week between psychotherapy sessions.

This new project, unlike the EPEG, is aimed at providing psychotherapy to adult women who have attempted suicide. The project’s frame of reference includes mainly fundamental aspects of Focusing, enriched with some Mindfulness attitudes and activities, and some additional MBCT explanations and activities, which I will be discussing later in this paper.

Some of life’s daily problems may be understood, in part, as a result of people “being disconnected” from their experiencing, and/or symbolizing it inadequately (Gendlin, 1970). In some cases, people stop living as a process, not seeing themselves as a *valuing center* in any interaction (Gendlin, 1964). The human organism as a *valuing center* refers to the capacity of an individual to know what promotes his development as a human being through sensations in his body/organism and to orient his interactions in everyday life from there. They start living through others, through orders and instructions, traditions, rules, etc., and not seeing through the lens of experiencing. Or they feel trapped in repetitive negative thoughts that hinder their ability to live in the present, listening and looking at their situations with their particular and current characteristics (Siegel, 2012; Williams & Swales, 2004).

When people are disconnected from their experiencing, it becomes difficult for them to find ways of interacting that are personally meaningful and valuable. In these cases, individuals may feel unable to cope with their problems, lacking resources and possibilities that would give them a sense of direction in life and in their daily interactions. These individuals do not perceive themselves as the authors or agents of their lives. If a person perceives their life situation as too painful and hopeless, he or she could consider committing suicide, feeling that it would be a way to alleviate suffering.

We could say that these people live on “automatic pilot” (Luoma & Villet, 2012), without a clear awareness of what they do and what they might be experiencing in their lives, at every moment. Often, their repetitive thoughts comprise the largest part of their world and their relationship with it. Under these conditions, people find themselves in a state of emotional vulnerability vis-à-vis incidents that could alter their state of mind, thus triggering a

process that may possibly lead to a suicide attempt (Williams et al., 2006). Research cited before about experiential avoidance shows its importance as a factor in suicide.

Teaching individuals clearer body awareness could quickly help them to identify when they are on automatic pilot so that other alternatives for interacting could be explored, breaking the vicious cycle. For example, they could attend and follow their breathing for a few minutes or take a pause to attend to the felt sense. These alternatives could allow a person's process to move toward a life-forward direction and far away from the vicious circle of negative thoughts.

From a Focusing perspective, Gendlin (2003) has stated: "without the bodily sense of the situation we could not know where we are or what we are doing" (p. 102). Instead, attending to the experiencing implies connecting to the wisdom of life. When we feel the lived body and the complexity of all the situations in our everyday lives, we discover in our *body/organism* a reliable guide toward our own wellbeing.

Gendlin (2003) summarized these ideas about the lived body when he wrote: "it implies, it urges, it implicitly shapes our next action. It senses itself living the situation in its whole context" (p. 102). From a Mindfulness perspective it is important to be in the present, to be aware of our feelings, thoughts, sensations, movements, without losing touch with surroundings. In MBCT it is important not to be trapped in a vicious circle of negative thoughts and distressing moods. It seems to me that if therapists would take the importance of the "lived body" as a referent, we might have more resources to understand the people with whom we work.

In this psychotherapy project, I acknowledge that as human beings, we are *interactions* with others and with our environment and that those interactions are oriented in a significant way by our "body-organisms." Paying attention to the experiential dimension points to the importance of differentiating among various ways of interacting that may take place in people's daily lives. This idea also implies "thinking differently about our embodied condition: the 'lived body' or the 'experiential body' ... A body that at the same time is material and energetic, rational and emotional, sensitive and measurable, personal and linkable, real and virtual..." (Najmanovich, 2001/2013, p. 17).

Currently, in these times, we find ourselves having many unprecedented life experiences. Social norms, traditions, and cultural patterns are not enough to guide us into living a satisfactory and meaningful life. Perhaps this is why we see everywhere many people who suffer and feel empty, dissatisfied, hopeless, and who live with various diseases (Béjar, 2007; Gendlin, 1993).

We predict that using Focusing and Mindfulness in everyday life interactions will encourage individuals to keep connected to their experiencing, and to interact from there in ways that promote their development. From this perspective, we can say that a person lives her life as an interactive process with other people and the environment. She can make mistakes but redirect her interactions as soon as she realizes something feels wrong. Because she no longer feels isolated, without resources to promote her wellbeing, she feels satisfied with her way of living.

However, there is another perspective. *Non-experiential interactions can be conducive to people ignoring their direct experiencing*, and thus, no longer living as an interactive process. People who allow themselves to be guided by the directives and expectations of others might likely live with a distorted symbolization of their own experiencing. People who are disconnected from others often feel that something is missing in their lives. They are unsatisfied with themselves and their way of living. They sometimes feel lost without knowing why or what to do to find meaning in their lives.

Individuals living in this disconnected way eventually stop listening to themselves, lose the sense of authorship and agency of their own lives, and stop feeling valued. Such individuals start feeling as if they are at the mercy of their circumstances, disconnected from everyone else, without a sense of belonging in this world when it comes to meaningful relationships with others. They ignore the possibility of finding a sense of direction for their interactions. This way of living can clearly be quite limiting when it comes to someone having the resilience to handle life's never-ending challenges.

Gendlin (1993) says: "Nowadays we could not get through the day if we went only by the rules, roles, and routines we were taught. Not that we can do without those old routines, but we have to modify and elaborate them. Many of our situations are now more complex and sometimes unique" (p. 31).

When we learn to be fully present in each moment, we see changes in the way we feel and in our relationship with the world around us. We feel deeply touched by the sky, trees, flowers, and other people. Our relationships and our connections to them become more intimate, sustained by a greater bond. We move toward living with more peace and harmony, feeling that our problems and preoccupations are not always a heavy burden that we have to carry on our shoulders, and paying attention to what we are doing at every moment. We can enjoy more everyday living (Hanh, 2008).

We realize, from our own experiencing, that life can only be lived in the here and now. This realization also gives us a place from which to contrast and question distorted beliefs and thought patterns that create discomfort and suffering, so that we can replace them with a perspective that comes from our own experiencing (Gendlin, 1996; Knapp & Beck, 2008).

Goals of the New Project

This new project will provide psychotherapy sessions from this Focusing/Mindfulness/ MBCT perspective for women who have attempted suicide. The purpose is to help them feel warmly welcomed, valued, respected, and understood in their particular way of living everyday life. In their sessions, participants will engage in experiential interactions so that they can focus on recognizing the various affective and cognitive meanings that their lived experiences have for them.

One of the goals is to facilitate a process through which the participants can learn to be aware of their own experiencing, expressing themselves from there and symbolizing it with precision. In addition, we will suggest home exercises as appropriate to encourage

mindfulness, the recognition of the felt sense, and setting aside thoughts for a while or looking at them in a detached way, also helping them connect to their inner silence.

Our experience in the EPEG project showed us that the women found their own ways of generating wellbeing in everyday life. They changed their interactions with other people and with their own circumstances. We hope that the added dimension of psychotherapy will give participants the opportunity to discover further resources for eliminating suffering and the lack of meaning in their lives and moving toward inner peace, harmony, self-acceptance, compassion, and the construction of meaningful interpersonal relations.

How Focusing, Mindfulness and MBCT Will Inform the Psychotherapy Sessions

The main point is that *the person* in the session is *the most important thing*. The psychotherapist's role is to *be with* the person who is present, "putting nothing in between" as Gendlin (1996, p. 286) says, that is, being mindful and fully present (Siegel, 2012), experiencing whatever comes while being with the person, and moving with that person's own rhythm (Moreno, 2009). This means that therapists will interact with each woman from the therapist's own experiencing rather than being guided by a protocol regarding the use of a specific technique.

Besides that, inviting each participant to be aware of the differences between felt sense, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and concrete circumstances seems like a rich addition to this project which was not in the former EPEG. Also, we will be proposing that participants look from a certain distance at their felt sense, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and other people's behavior. In particular, therapists will encourage participants to check their thoughts with their felt sense.

The psychotherapist will suggest some activities for the participants to do during the week. Paying attention to their breathing for a few minutes, three or four times a day, is one such activity. Focusing on breathing is an essential activity that promotes Mindfulness, helps us to manage the difficulties in a better way and develops our wisdom and compassion (Hanh, 2008, p. 9). Also, breathing is a practice of learning to pay attention to the sensations, without judging or labeling or wanting to change them. Therefore, the combined processes promote good conditions for recognizing the felt sense.

Other activities will include paying attention to sensations and feelings when the participant takes a shower, washes dishes, or walks. I predict that being more aware of movements and sensations when doing these activities will help each participant feel more relaxed and peaceful.

Making a pause to attend to the felt sense is another practice we regularly suggest that participants use during the week. In the pause, they will attend to what they are sensing, feeling, or thinking, from a certain distance, enabling them to realize that they are more than all those feelings and thoughts.

By the end of the psychotherapeutic process, a team project member will do a phenomenological interview to find out how the people *lived* their psychotherapy sessions. We want to know from their own perspective what was useful in making their lives feel more satisfying to them. In addition, we will do a phenomenological analysis of the psychotherapy sessions.

IN CONCLUSION

Crossing several theories or philosophies comes from living, from experiencing different situations, and from talking and listening carefully to people. In addition, *crossing* comes from sharing and experimenting with new ways of interacting amongst friends and trustworthy colleagues. Another path for crossing is doing something in a different way, to discover how it feels and what happens. Living and describing come first. Later, we share our lived experience, trying to understand each other. Only after that, we look for theoretical or conceptual ways of explaining.

For example: I pay attention to the movement of my belly while breathing. I pay attention to different parts of my body and become aware of how they feel (without giving it an explanation). I identify everything inside that prevents me from feeling well, and my attention is directed to the taste and texture of a strawberry that I eat. I realize how I am bodily feeling in the presence of another person. I live, describe, and share my lived experience. Only later I would ask: What am I doing? Am I engaged in Focusing or in Mindfulness?

If I take a pause to look at my thoughts from a distance I become aware that they *are* thoughts, and they are different from myself, from other people and things—is that action from Focusing, Mindfulness or MBCT? If I pay attention to what I see, hear, feel, taste, and sense in a non-judgmental way—is that Focusing, Mindfulness or MBCT?

At an experiential level it is not always easy to differentiate where each of these frames of reference begins and ends. They are mixed in a bodily way. Further, life situations are far too complex to describe and comprehend based on a single frame of reference. Different practices and theories help me understand, recognize and sense new nuances.

Focusing looks at human beings as *interactions* that *carry forward* an *implicit complexity* when they live from the *experiencing* (Gendlin, 1996, 2003, 2012).

Mindfulness emphasizes being with whatever is present, without judging, with acceptance and compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2010; Hanh, 2008).

MBCT points to the importance of negative thoughts in depression and suicidal intentions. Rather than fighting these negative thoughts, the process invites us to look at them in a mindful way, so “a person observes the active, ongoing process of thinking, rather than merely experiencing the world as structured through thought” (Luoma & Villate, p. 268). Some studies in MBCT have shown that “attempting to suppress intrusive thoughts tends to result in an increase in intensity and frequency of those very thoughts, as well as increases

in the intensity of negative emotions accompanying those thoughts” (Roemer & Borkovec, 1994; cited in Luoma & Villate, 2012, p. 270-271).

Crossing Focusing, Mindfulness and MBCT makes me feel enriched in my personal and professional life, generating new possibilities and a sense of wellbeing in everyday life, and with ever more resources to share with the people with whom I work. The process reassures my trust in living beyond words, theories and explanations, and opening to new discoveries.

As Najmanovich (2009) has pointed out, “The dimensions of bodily experiences cannot be ‘integrated’ in a single body of knowledge since these represent different ways of focusing on lived experiences” (p.6).

In the end, we all must answer the same questions, whether for our professional practice or for our own personal living. How am I to live? Do I attend to what I feel/think, or do I remain absorbed in my mental constructs? Do I attend to the present, or do I stay immersed in past memories or concerns about the future? Do I live within the interactive process of carrying my life forward, or do I live based on what I am supposed to do, disregarding my experiencing?

From my own felt experience, I know/feel/sense now that people are more than theories. I know that beyond theories, explanations and concepts, it is possible to live as a rich moving complexity that we cannot grasp or understand completely with any theory, concept, or word. Theories are partial, and provisional. In living, there are always new colors and facets, and that feels great.

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